



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 30 March 2021
(OR. en, fr)

7422/21

VISA 63
COMIX 175

NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Visa Working Party/Mixed Committee (EU-Iceland/Norway and
Switzerland/Liechtenstein)

No. prev. doc.: 10410/19 + ADD 1

Subject: Local Schengen cooperation between Member States' consulates
(Article 48(5) of the Visa Code)
- Compilation of 2020 annual reports

Delegations will find attached the annual reports drawn up in the local Schengen cooperation, as transmitted by the services of the Commission.

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION ANNUAL REPORTS – 2020

<u>ALBANIA</u>	4
<u>ALGERIA</u>	7
<u>ARMENIA</u>	10
<u>AUSTRALIA</u>	12
<u>AZERBAIJAN</u>	15
<u>BANGLADESH/ DHAKA</u>	19
<u>BELARUS</u>	22
<u>BENIN, COTONOU</u>	25
<u>BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA</u>	27
<u>BOLIVIA</u>	32
<u>BOTSWANA</u>	35
<u>BRAZIL</u>	38
<u>BURKINA FASO</u>	42
<u>BURUNDI</u>	44
<u>CANADA, OTTAWA</u>	46
<u>CONGO (D.R.)</u>	50
<u>CÔTE D’IVOIRE</u>	52
<u>DOMINICAN REPUBLIC</u>	54
<u>ECUADOR</u>	57
<u>EGYPT</u>	60
<u>ETHIOPIA</u>	63
<u>GEORGIA</u>	67
<u>GHANA</u>	70
<u>HONG KONG AND MACAO</u>	73
<u>INDIA</u>	75
<u>IRAN</u>	79
<u>IRAQ, ERBIL</u>	82
<u>ISRAEL</u>	84
<u>JORDAN</u>	86
<u>KAZAKHSTAN</u>	89
<u>KOSOVO</u>	93
<u>KYRGYZ REPUBLIC, BISHKEK</u>	98

<u>LAOS</u>	100
<u>MEXICO</u>	102
<u>MOLDOVA</u>	105
<u>MONTENEGRO</u>	107
<u>MOROCCO</u>	110
<u>MOSCOW, ST-PETERSBURG and EKATERINBURG</u>	115
<u>MOZAMBIQUE</u>	122
<u>NAMIBIA, WINDHOEK</u>	125
<u>PERU</u>	128
<u>PHILIPPINES</u>	132
<u>RWANDA</u>	134
<u>REPUBLIC OF KOREA</u>	136
<u>SAUDI ARABIA</u>	139
<u>SENEGAL</u>	143
<u>SERBIA</u>	147
<u>SRI LANKA AND MALDIVES</u>	149
<u>TANZANIA</u>	153
<u>THAILAND</u>	155
<u>TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO</u>	158
<u>TUNISIA</u>	160
<u>TURKEY</u>	164
<u>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES</u>	167
<u>UGANDA</u>	170
<u>UKRAINE</u>	172
<u>UNITED KINGDOM (LONDON)</u>	176
<u>UNITED STATES (WASHINGTON D.C.)</u>	178
<u>VIETNAM, HANOI</u>	182
<u>ZAMBIA</u>	185



EUROPEAN UNION - BASHKIMI EVROPIAN

DELEGATION TO ALBANIA
DELEGACIONI NE SHQIPERI

European Integration, Political, Press and Information Section

29 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Albania 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

16 Member States have diplomatic representations in Albania and six (Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, and Slovakia) are represented by other Member States for Schengen visas.

Some of the Member States represented in Albania do not however issue Schengen visas in Albania but in a neighbouring country.

Among non-EU Schengen countries, only Switzerland has a diplomatic representation in Tirana but does not issue visas here.

Outside Tirana, Greece has two General Consulates, in Gjirokastra and Korca. Italy has one General Consulate in Vlora.

Several EU Member States represented in Tirana also have Honorary Consuls outside the capital: Austria (Shkodra), Bulgaria (Vlora), France (Korca), Hungary (Shkodra), Italy (Gjirokastra, Shkodra) and Romania (Korca). Italy has one Consular Correspondent in Berat.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The Covid-19 crisis drastically reduced the number of Schengen visas issued by Member States in Albania. At the peak of the crisis in 2020, many Member States had to close temporarily their consular services to the public.

The EU Delegation organised and chaired three meetings of the Local Schengen Cooperation in 2020. Two of these meetings were held online. All of them were well attended by Member States represented in Albania.

The June LSC Meeting was entirely dedicated to discuss the questionnaire circulated by HQ for a coordinated resumption of Schengen visa issuance. Most Member States filled up the questionnaire. The answers showed that EU Member States represented in Albania were well aligned in terms of sanitary measures put in place and readiness to resume the issuance of Schengen visas.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The first LSC meeting of 2020 – in January - allowed to have a discussion on the upcoming entry into force of the revised Visa Code. The EU Delegation presented the main new elements introduced by the revised Visa code and the expected increased role for the LSC.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The exercise of drafting the list of supporting documents was a core activity of the LSC in Albania in 2020, via discussions within LSC meetings but also via email exchanges among the group.

A consensus was reached in November 2020 on the draft list, which was then forwarded to the Visa Committee (work ongoing in January 2021).

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Since very few Schengen visas are issued by EU Member States in Albania, and considering the additional effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in reducing this number, the discussion at the October LSC meeting on “MEV cascades” was not conclusive as too little experience could be exchanged on the new rules from EU Member States.

3.4. Exchange of information

The new template to provide quarterly statistics on Schengen visa was shared with EU Member States. The answers received have not provided a complete overview to date. The table will be re-circulated in early 2021 to the group to get a more accurate picture of all Schengen visas issued in 2020. The COVID-19 has obviously greatly reduced the number of Schengen visas issued. Some EU Member States have reported 0 Schengen visa during the second trimester which was most affected by the pandemic.

The LSC held a discussion on the use of VISMail in its January meeting, after the EU Delegation circulated the note prepared by HQ for this purpose and an agreement had been reached within the LSC to systematically use VISMail when appropriate as of 1st January 2020.

The discussion showed that due to the limited number of Schengen visas issued by EU Member States in Albania, there is a very limited experience in using VISMail, many Member States reporting having no experience with using it in Albania.

3.5. Any other initiative taken in LSC

In October, the EU Delegation published a statement to counter some misinformation circulating in the Albanian media regarding the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS). It presented ETIAS as equivalent to re-introducing a Schengen visas requirement for Albanian citizens. The EU Delegation’s statement brought back the facts straight, which allowed immediately to stop the spreading of this misinformation. The LSC group welcomed this intervention from the EU Delegation.

The EU Delegation initiated a discussion on the issue of Albanian citizens requesting some EU Member States to access their personal information in SIS to know if they are subject of an entry ban. This had been flagged as creating an administrative burden to some Member States. The discussion at LSC showed that the issue was not significant enough to justify a demarche towards the Albanian authorities.

LSC meetings continued to provide a platform to compare trends, figures and analysis on the abuse of visa free regime by Albanian citizens who apply for asylum in EU Member States. All EU Member States have continued to praise their cooperation with the Albanian authorities and the measures enforced by them to tackle this phenomenon. The number of Albanian asylum applicants in EU 27 sharply decreased in 2020 (-67% in January-October 2020 compared to January-October 2019, according to Eurostat). The Covid-19 pandemic played of course a significant role in this decrease.

4. Challenges

The LSC in Albania will revert to the issue of the “MEV cascades” in the course of 2021, with a view to implement the provisions of the revised Visa Code on this point, provided enough experience will be gathered among EU Member States represented in Albania on this issue in the coming year.



COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) EN ALGERIE RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

Dix-huit Etats membres de l'espace Schengen ont une présence diplomatique en Algérie, à savoir: AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SE. En dehors de la capitale, FR et ES disposent des consulats à Oran, et FR à Annaba. Pour les questions de visa AT, BE, CZ, DE, ES, HU et PL représentent respectivement SI, LU, SK, LT, EE, LV et SE. NO représente DK et IS.

Suite au déclenchement de la pandémie COVID-19, à la décision des autorités algériennes de fermer les frontières internationales, et aux restrictions de voyage appliquées du côté européen, les États membres présents ont suspendu les opérations de visa Schengen en mars 2020, sauf pour certains Etats membres pour les cas exceptionnels prévus dans la « *EU temporary restriction* » dont le traitement n'a jamais été suspendu. La plupart des États membres ont recommencé à délivrer des visas nationaux en juin et juillet. Plusieurs États membres ont signalé d'avoir délivré un nombre très limité de visas C pour des voyages essentiels. L'ensemble des États membres ont convenu qu'une reprise normale des opérations de visa ne pourra pas avoir lieu jusqu'à la réouverture des frontières internationales de l'Algérie, et à la levée des restrictions de voyage du côté européen ce qui n'est pas encore prévu au moment de la rédaction de ce rapport.

La collaboration LSC s'est poursuivie au cours de la période écoulée, au dépit des difficultés liées à la crise sanitaire. Les réunions du groupe LSC ont été organisées à l'extérieur en tenant compte des mesures préventives nécessaires contre la propagation du COVID-19, ou en ligne (Webex). En outre, des informations ont également été régulièrement échangées via des canaux plus informels (emails, messagerie instantanée).

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

En 2020, neuf réunions ont été organisées sous la présidence de la Délégation de l'UE, dont cinq ont porté sur la révision de la liste harmonisée des documents justificatifs et l'adaptation locale de la cascade MEV (article 24(2) Code de Visas). Le taux de participation des Etats membres aux réunions est resté généralement bon. Bulgarie, Croatie et Roumanie ont assisté en tant qu'observateurs au plupart des réunions en 2020. Les rapports des réunions LSC sont établis par la Délégation de l'UE et partagés avec les Etats membres, y compris avec les consulats en dehors d'Alger.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1. Application du Code des Visas

Pendant la période de référence, les Etats membres et la Délégation de l'UE ont continué leur coopération en conformité avec les dispositions du Code des Visas. Lors de l'entrée en vigueur du Code des Visas révisé, plusieurs Etats membres ont soulevé des inquiétudes quant à l'application locale de l'article 24 (2). Après des discussions approfondies, la majorité des Etats membres représentés s'est exprimée favorablement sur une proposition pour l'adaptation locale des « cascades MEV » (voir également la section 3.3).

3.2. Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

En septembre 2020, les États membres représentés ont trouvé un accord à l'unanimité sur une proposition pour la révision de la liste des documents justificatifs telle que définie dans la Décision d'exécution C (2016) 5927 du 23 septembre 2016. La proposition a été transmise aux services de la Commission pour diffusion et discussion au sein du comité des visas.

3.3 Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

En parallèle avec la proposition pour la révision de la liste de justificatifs, la majorité des Etats membres s'est exprimée favorablement sur une proposition pour l'adaptation locale des « cascades MEV », également transmise aux services de la Commission pour diffusion et discussion au sein du comité des visas.

3.4. Harmonisation des procédures

Les Etats membres ont convenu à plusieurs reprises sur la nécessité de se coordonner, le moment venu, pour la reprise des opérations de visa Schengen. En attendant la réouverture des frontières internationales de l'Algérie et la levée des restrictions de voyage du côté européen, les États membres restent donc en contact sur la reprise commune des opérations de visa. Lors d'une réunion en juin 2020, les États membres ont signalé que le redémarrage des opérations pourrait être fait, en étroite coopération avec le prestataire, en 24H après la levée des restrictions de voyage.

3.5. Echange d'informations

En raison des circonstances particulières de la suspension des opérations de visa déjà au premier trimestre de cette année, il n'y avait pas de base opérationnelle nécessaire pour l'échange d'informations sur des sujets plus courants tels que la fraude documentaire, l'assurance médicale des voyageurs et l'utilisation de VISMail. Logiquement, l'accent a été mis davantage sur les sujets consulaires.

3.6. D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Une réunion thématique a été organisée en février 2020 avec un représentant du Réseau Européen de Retour et de Réadmission (ERRIN) dans le cadre d'une visite exploratoire à Alger. La discussion a porté sur un éventuel développement des activités d'ERRIN en Algérie.

4. Défis

Comme préconisé par le rapport précédent, au cours de 2020 les États membres ont trouvé un accord sur la proposition de révision de la liste des documents justificatifs devant être présentés par les demandeurs de visa en Algérie. La collaboration en matière de lutte contre la fraude a également été renforcée au cours de l'année 2019, en s'appuyant sur la session thématique consacrée à ce sujet. Le groupe LSC n'a pas encore pu se pencher sur la question de formuler des messages communs pour le public sur la procédure de demande de visa afin de lutter contre les intermédiaires frauduleux. Le travail sur ce sujet commencera en 2021. Cependant, le principal défi de l'année 2021 sera la reprise coordonnée des opérations de visa et, pour les services consulaires des États membre, le rattrapage des arriérés cumulés tout au long de l'année 2020. Les États membres s'inquiètent, entre autre, du probable niveau encore plus élevé, dans un contexte déjà caractérisé pour son ampleur, du visa shopping, qu'au moins deux facteurs entraineront dans le moyen et long terme en Algérie, à savoir: 1) une capacité de traitement des dossiers (consulats) et d'accueil (consulats et prestataires) des demandeurs encore limitée à cause de la pandémie; et 2) une liste d'attente sans précédents des demandeurs liée en particulier à l'expiration, désormais, de presque la totalité des visas Schengen (90, C1 ou C2) émis en Algérie jusqu'à 2019. A ce dernier propos, faut-il rappeler que l'Algérie, en 2019 a été le sixième pour nombre de demandes de visa (670.000 presque) et le septième pour nombre de visas délivrés (375.000 presque), avec un taux de refus moyen parmi les plus élevés (aux alentours du 43%). Presque le 30% des 375.000 visa délivrés en 2019 sont des visas à entrées multiples (MEV) dont on peut estimer que la validité n'est presque jamais supérieure à 2 ans.

5. Divers

Le rapport a été approuvé par tous les États membres présents en Algérie.



29 January, 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN YEREVAN, ARMENIA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

12 MS have resident embassies in Armenia; 7- France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Czech Republic and Poland- issue Schengen visas in the location, Austria is represented outside capital Yerevan (Moscow). Due to the pandemic, the opening of a visa section at the Slovak Embassy in Yerevan was postponed.

For visa purposes, apart from their own countries: **France** represents Portugal, Norway, and Iceland; **Germany** represents Belgium, Luxemburg and Sweden; **Italy** represents Finland and Malta; **Lithuania** represents Spain, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia and the Netherlands; **Poland** represents Slovenia, Slovakia, and Switzerland. **Czech Republic** and **Greece** issue Schengen visa only to their respective countries. Lithuania, Greece, Austria and Italy co-operate with external service providers: VFS Global (LT, GR, AT) and TLS Contact (IT).

In the reporting period, the EU Delegation coordinated Schengen meetings.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Three LSC meetings took place in the reporting period; they focused on the new Visa Code, harmonization practices, ways to address existing challenges and the impact of COVID-19 crisis on their operations. Two ad hoc meetings with consuls were organized to discuss crisis preparedness and possible evacuation of EU nationals and their families due to the conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh; visa issues were also discussed as some family members did not have or had expired Schengen visas.

All MS confirmed the COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on their operations in terms of technical arrangements (reduced staff, shift work, sanitary situation, etc) also due to the Commission recommendation on a temporary restriction of non-essential travel from third countries into the EU and Schengen area. This fact drastically reduced the number of applications and visas were issued for essential travel only and in special circumstances.

The EU Delegation chaired the meetings, which were well attended. Meeting reports were prepared by the Delegation. The MS acknowledged the role of the Delegation and in particular the LSC meetings as an important platform for exchanging views on topical issues and in crisis situations. LSC coordination during the pandemic can be assessed as good.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

Despite current circumstances, the MS made efforts to ensure tasks under the Visa Code.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The MS did not mention any particular need to further harmonise the existing list of supporting documents.

DE amended the requirements for medical visas according to instructions from the capital; applicants traveling for medical purposes will have to present additionally a special form from a German clinic, and a confirmation issued by a local clinic that the illness cannot be treated (at least at present) in Armenia. A proof of transfer of treatment costs to the clinic is required too. This measure is i.a. aimed at preventing the misuse of appointment system.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The MS generally applied the cascade system; however, due to travel restrictions, currently in place, MEV cascade system may not be fully implemented.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

N/A

3.5. Exchange of information

Due to very limited number of applications, exchange of information on e.g cases of fraud, statistics and TMI, drastically reduced. Email remained the main means of communication, as VISmail is not always user friendly.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

Resumption of operations once travel restrictions are lifted is believed to be one of the main challenges for the MS in 2021. According to consuls, coordinated approach and simultaneous re-opening of visa sections will prevent huge influx of applicants into a specific MS although the extent of operations is still to be decided by the capitals based on sound data on COVID-19 situation in Armenia.

Also the post-conflict and domestic political situation, as well as economic hardships as a result of pandemic may possibly increase migration risks. CZ reported several cases of asylum inquiries by residents of Nagorno Karabakh.

Other issues

N/A



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO AUSTRALIA

12 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) AUSTRALIA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 22 Schengen countries represented in Australia (AT, BE, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, LT, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SK, SI, ES, SE and CH) who regularly participate in the meetings of the LSC Group. These have embassies in Canberra and consular networks of varying extent across the country; some Embassies are not empowered to issue Schengen visas. All meetings in 2020 were held in Canberra and were in part held via a mixture of in-person and WEBEX, in order to ensure full compliance with COVID-19 measures). Meetings in Sydney could not be convened due to COVID-19 measures. Observer Countries represented in Australia attended on a semi-regular basis (BG, HR, CY and RO). LSC group meetings are run back-to-back with the Consular Group, a formula that has been working well since its inception in 2013 (since 2014 non EU-Schengen Members can also attend the Consular Group meeting as observers, following local agreement in this sense).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The LSC Group met four times during 2020, however one meeting was held together with the Consular officers and was entirely devoted to COVID-19. The attendance of the LSC meetings for the period under consideration was very high – one MS however did not attend the meetings until recently. The Head of the Political, Press and Information Section of EUDEL chaired the meetings. Draft minutes were prepared by EUDEL, shared for approval with the Group under silent procedure and then submitted to HQ. We confirm that the Schengen countries normally share these minutes with their HQ.

During the height of the COVID-19 crisis, LSC meetings were held entirely via WEBEX. As the pandemic situation eased in Australia, we reverted to a mix of in-person and WEBEX meetings, which is useful, and can now under Australian practices move to fully in-person meetings, however, to accommodate MS consular colleagues in Sydney we continued to offer WEBEX.

3. State-of-play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

EUDEL shared with MS the information pertaining to the revised Visa Code and the Visa Code Handbook, No apparent problem has arisen The item is included as standard on all LSC Group meeting agendas. Due to COVID-19 restrictions in Europe and Australia, all visa operations ceased for the major part of 2020; visa services have resumed in reduced scale during the last quarter.

3.2. Assessment of the list of supporting documents

All Schengen countries represented in Australia have included on their websites the correct information re. the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants of short stay visas in Australia (as per Commission Decision C (2017) 5853). To date, there has been no suggestion that said list should be amended.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

The issuing of MEVs was not discussed in any detail during LSC Group meetings (only some countries issue MEVs with a validity of 1 to 2 years). There is a de facto agreement in place among Schengen countries to share information if they feel a candidate may be "shopping" around, but no suggestion to harmonise visa-issuing practices: at this stage this is not considered necessary (small number of visa applications for most Schengen countries, hence low security risk).

3.5. Exchange of information

Since 2018, the rotating Consular Presidency has been collecting the visa statistics using the updated template provided by HQ. HR collected the statistics during the first six months of 2020 and DE during the last six months. Given COVID-19 related travel restrictions and the overall travel disruption, the number of Schengen visas issued in AUS have registered a substantial reduction throughout the year.

Most MS provide the data in a timely fashion; however, there are a few who still need to be reminded.

There have been no reported cases of fraud during 2020 and TMI has not been an item up for discussion. As advised previously, there were issues with insurance companies not offering adequate insurance. Since the EUDEL with the assistance of the LSC group drew up a list of insurance companies who offer adequate TMI and shared it with the group (including both onshore and offshore companies), this issue seems to have been resolved.

EUDEL shares information with Schengen countries on a regular basis with most information uploaded onto the password protected AGORA local Intranet. Schengen countries that are not part of the EU have access to the specific Schengen agora sub group.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

EUDEL and the LSC Group drafted a document titled "Where to apply for a Schengen Visa in Australia" which is kept up to date and is available on the EUDEL's website, together with the FAQ. We have encouraged all Schengen countries to include both these documents on their websites to accompany the "Established list of common documents for Australia".

EUDEL advised the LSC Group that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) had linked their Smart Traveller Website to the EUDEL's website - <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/before-you-go/the-basics/schengen?>

4. Challenges

In the 2018/2019 report, EUDEL advised on the problematic processing of visa applications in FIJI and PNG, due to the lack of EU missions that could issue Schengen Visas and the subsequent need for applicants to travel to other countries to lodge their visa application. Due to COVID-19, this issue became dormant in 2020 but will resurface again if and when pre-COVID-19 travelling patterns resume.

5. Other issues

No other issues at present.

This report has been approved by all Member States.



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO Azerbaijan

Head of Delegation

Baku, 29 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN AZERBAIJAN 2020 REPORT¹

1. Introduction

The reporting period covers the sixth year of the implementation of the EU-Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation Agreement (further referred as VFA) (signed on November 29, 2013, entered into force on September 1, 2014).

There are 21 diplomatic missions (15 embassies and 5 embassy offices) of EU Member States, including the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Azerbaijan (EUDEL), accredited to Azerbaijan². Among non-EU Schengen countries, Switzerland has a diplomatic mission in Baku.

The following 11 LSC Member States are physically present and issuing visas in Baku (Azerbaijan): Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, as well as Switzerland. Norway moved the responsibility for visa and residence cases from Baku (Azerbaijan) to Ankara (Turkey) in August 2018 and closed their embassy in 2018.

The following Schengen countries are represented by other Member States as follows: Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Sweden are represented by France; Estonia, Slovak Republic and Slovenia are represented by Latvia and Malta is represented by Italy. The Norwegian Embassy in Ankara represents Denmark, Finland and Iceland in Baku³.

The majority (8 out of 11) of the LSC members are using external service providers.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic only a few LSC meetings were held during the reporting period (on 29 January, 26 February, 17 June and 30 September). All meetings were well attended. Non LSC EU MS sometimes participated as observers in the meetings upon the common agreement of the LSC participants. An ad hoc meeting was held with a representative from the US Embassy on the subjects of mutual interests.

All meetings were held on the premises of the EUDEL / EU residence, except for the meeting on 17 June which was held virtually due to a pandemic lockdown in the country. All meetings were convened and chaired by the representative of EUDEL. Taking into account the local practices in other third countries, a shared burden in compiling the statistics locally and having a rotating

¹ January 2020-December 2020.

² Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Slovenia have their diplomatic representations accredited outside of Azerbaijan.

³ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the representation agreements are temporarily suspended.

chairmanship between LSC members was made. France agreed to share a burden in compiling the statistics locally in the first semester of 2020. There has been no suggestion by EU MS in taking a chairmanship over the group.

The reports of the meetings were prepared by the EUDEL and upon request shared with MS. There is no established practice to share the reports prepared by individual MS. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic the coordination with the LSC has been working smoothly, but as a result there were significantly less meetings of the group. Communication was transferred mainly to the WhatsApp group, which worked quite effectively until the outbreak of the war in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 when the use of social media networks was severely restricted in Azerbaijan, preventing communication via the LSC Whatsapp (except for those users that were able to ensure its use via a VPN connection). This communication was restored after the war ended. Following the outbreak of the pandemic pandemic members of LSC were limited to the minimum issuance of C-visas.

The main issues discussed during the LSC meetings were as follows:

- (i) entry into force of the new Visa Code;
- (ii) trends in visa statistics;
- (iii) negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the issuing of multiple-entry visas (MEV) and the trend of issuing national single entry visas (SEV) for specific reasons after the first lockdown due to the pandemic (CH informed about the practice of issuing laissez passer in addition to visas) and readmission charter flights from some EU MS to Azerbaijan;
- (iv) issues related to the implementation of VFA, in particular long-standing open issues in Azerbaijan regarding issuing of MEV, waiving of visa fees when required by the Visa Code, visa refusal rates, access to Azerbaijani E-Government portal;
- (v) potential consular crisis following the outbreak of the second war in the Nagorno-Karabakh in September-November 2020;
- (vi) Brexit.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The Visa Code has been applied since May 2010 and is being implemented by the LSC states consular offices located in Azerbaijan.

The Visa Code is implemented with maximum capacity by local consulates. All posts/consuls are well informed and trained to run local consular offices and apply common visa policies, assess migration/security risks etc. The communication and coherent cooperation between locally accredited consulates is well established and the harmonisation of practices is a permanent work in progress.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In summer 2018, LSC decided to review the Harmonised list and started a review procedure.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The topic was discussed at the LSC Meeting on 29 January, but no common practice could be found yet. Some Schengen countries confirmed that the „MEV cascade rule“ in accordance with Article 24(2) is applied.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

LSC has had an exchange related to harmonisation of practices.

3.5. Exchange of information

Exchanges on monthly visa statistics and trends continued. Member States agreed to share the burden of compiling the statistics locally in 2020. There was a trend of decreasing visa applications due to the pandemic situation in 2020.

Exchanges were held on some visa-fraud attempts.

There were no discussions on travel medical insurance during the reporting period.

No information available.

Due to the war in the Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, interaction with the local authorities was hampered. A planned meeting of the group with a representative of the Azerbaijani MFA in September was postponed at short notice due to the general situation in the country.

The cooperation with external service providers is very common; the majority of LSC consulates rely on their services. Consuls carried out inspections on regular basis.

There were no discussions on the use of VISMail and VIS during the reporting period.

An exchange within LSC was related to the new legislation (new Visa Code).

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Some external guests were invited to the LSC meetings such a representative of the consular section of the US embassy and a representative of the consular department in the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

4. Challenges

4.1. Describe the response to challenges, if any, listed in the 2018-2019 report

- A few MS volunteered to share the burden in compiling the statistics.
- Timely information related to the updates on national legislation by the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan remains a challenge.
- Regular exchanges to address suspected cases of visa fraud or migration alerts are taking place .

4.2. Describe issues to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021)

- Ensuring the continuity of LSC meetings and sharing the burden with volunteering LSC members.
- Continuing to share the information on legal updates related to consular issues.
- The need to follow up the implementation of the VFA with particular focus on the issuance of long term duration MEV from the Azerbaijan side and that all EU MS ensure simultaneous acceptance of applications for C-visas.

5. Other issues

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the EU-Azerbaijan Joint Visa Facilitation Committee meeting did not take place in 2020 (the most recent meeting took place in Baku in November 2019) and the next meeting is scheduled to take place in the first half of 2021.
- The 6th EU-Azerbaijan Joint Readmission Committee took place in 2020 by written exchange. The EU transmitted its input on 30 September. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in 2021.
- Azerbaijan and Turkey in December 2020 signed a protocol allowing for travel between the two countries for Azerbaijani and Turkish nationals using ID cards only.



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO BANGLADESH
LSC Dhaka

30/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Dhaka / Bangladesh 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

9 Member States are present and 18 are represented in Dhaka.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

EU Delegation, Head of Administration Chairs the LSC meetings and draws up the reports.

Meetings are scheduled on a bi-monthly basis, with the possibility of additional ad hoc meetings if an urgent need arises. Meetings are generally well attended. Occasionally a MS may be absent due to staffing constraints or a heavy workload. Due to the COVID19 Pandemic the meetings in June, September and November took place in a semi virtual format with some MS attending physically and others via WebEx.

The LSC discussed on the frequency of meetings and concluded to hold them as planned 5-6 times a year only. As there is a regular exchange via WhatsApp groups and email in between meetings a more frequently LSC meeting schedule would not improve the quality of exchange or was deemed necessary. Furthermore, many of the participants meet in other formats (Admin, Consular, DHoM, Security) as well.

Nevertheless the group agreed that an ad hoc meeting would be scheduled whenever the local circumstances change or when the Council recommends lifting of the travel restrictions for Bangladesh.

The LSC opined that the conditions were currently not met in Bangladesh to lift the travel restrictions for non-essential travel to the EU in view of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and in Europe. The situation will be closely monitored, but is not expected to change in a positive way in the coming weeks or months. Resumption of normal visa operations from a logistical point of view is possible within a short time, whenever the Council recommends to lift the travel restrictions. In the meantime, MS will honour visa request for essential travel, if necessary with ad hoc representations as representation agreements mostly have been suspended.

All MS report that numbers of visa applications have been extremely low since March 2020.

Due to the extreme low number of applications, no new trends in applicants' behaviour or profiles (e.g. trying to avoid travel restrictions by presenting –fraudulent- documents that try to indicate medical problems or family connections to be eligible for a visa) have been recognised.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUD's are well prepared to ensure the tasks to be carried out in LSC under the Visa Code and beside the COVID 19 pandemic that stopped or significantly reduced visa operations no specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code focusing on the revised rules applicable since February 2020 have been reported.

It has to be noted that all Schengen representation agreements have been suspended (except Sweden for Iceland)

No challenges to respect of the deadlines set by the Visa Code for the different steps of the lodging and examination procedure have been observed so far.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonized list of supporting documents for visa applications in Bangladesh was adopted on 30.8.2017 and implementation started in September 2017. None of the MS has raised any difficulty with the implementation.

The topic has been discussed during the first LSC meeting in 2020, but none of the MS sees any need to amend the existing list.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

All MS are prepared to apply the new rules once visa operations recommence, but they could not be applied yet because of the COVID19 pandemic.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Although no cases of visa shopping or problems with different visa fees have been observed, MS attempt to harmonize the visa fee in line with the Visa code article 16(7). However, the different national systems do not allow for full implementation of article 16(7).

3.5. Exchange of information

MS exchange the following information:

- quarterly statistics are shared by MS via email and afterwards collated by Chair LSC and circulated to all MS and discussed in LSC meetings;
- cases of possible fraud (e.g. questionable invitations from Austrian and German Travel agents, which have been forwarded and followed up with the national authorities) or practical cases or difficulties encountered (during LSC meeting or ad hoc if deemed urgent);
- a common list of insurance companies / policies offering adequate travel medical insurance (TMI) has been discussed, but is difficult to be implemented, therefore individual checks on coverage are preferred for now,

- question of detection of possible COVID exclusions in the TMIs once visa are granted in higher numbers is still unsolved
- Only a few companies appear to be regularly used by applicants, often policies with international insurance companies outside Bangladesh are subscribed.
- In general the cooperation with local banks to cross check documents is good, but depends on the ability of the local staff charged with that task
- cooperation with external service providers works well in general
 - ES uses BLS and
 - IT, SE and DK use VFS
 - DE wanted to start with VFS from March 2020, but it has been delayed because of COVID
 - FR and CH: direct applications at the Embassy
- limited monitoring necessary due to COVID in 2020
- The chair has informed the LSC that all consulates worldwide should only use VIS Mail and stop communication of applicant data by non-encrypted email as from 2 February 2020. Nevertheless for practical reasons MS report to still use it only rarely and mainly for communication with central authorities of other countries. IT is not using it at all and DE reported that it is rarely used; inbox however is checked on a regular basis.
- Sharing of latest information on the local epidemiological situation on COVID19
- Regular and lively ad hoc information exchange (especially on local developments, press articles, NV from MFA) on non-sensitive issues is taking place via email and in WhatsApp groups

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

The EURLO (European Return Liaison Officer), funded by the AMIF (till 2020) / FRONTEX (from 2021) and hosted by NL is posted in Dhaka since 2017.

The EMLO (European Migration Liaison Officer), funded by DE and hosted by EU (SNE post) is posted in Dhaka since October 2020.

Both are an integral part of the LSC Bangladesh and as such invited to all LSC meetings and contribute with their experience especially about migration topics.

Usually Guest speakers have been invited from time to time, but no such initiatives took place in 2020 due to the COVID 19 restrictions.

4. Challenges

Restart of visa operations in 2021 under post COVID19 circumstances, especially coordinated timing of such a restart to avoid visa shopping

Coordination of Representation (as the relevant agreements are suspended currently)

5. Other issues

This annual report was drafted by the LSC Chair and commented by LSC MS. All MS in the LSC Bangladesh have approved the final version.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO BELARUS

28/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in BELARUS 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

1. Introduction

14 EU Schengen Member States are present in Belarus: Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovak Republic and Sweden. From non-EU Schengen MS Switzerland is present as well. Ten Schengen Member States (MS) deliver visas (Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovak Republic).

Latvia has a consulate in Viciebsk, Lithuania has a consulate in Hrodna. Poland's consulates in Hrodna and Brest operate with very limited staff. Eleven MS operate visa application centres (Austria, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Estonia, Slovak Republic). Italy temporarily closed visa centres in Homiel and Brest.

As representation is concerned, please note the following:

1. Estonia represents Finland and Sweden; since October 2020 also Poland (for certain categories of visas, such as truck drivers, business visas);
2. France represents Iceland and Norway;
3. Germany represents Austria (representation suspended due to COVID-19 travel restrictions), Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Slovenia;
4. Hungary represents Switzerland and Liechtenstein; since October 2020 also Poland (for certain categories of visas, such as truck drivers, business visas);
5. Italy represents Malta;
6. Latvia in Viciebsk represents Poland, Austria, the Netherlands, France and Slovenia. Currently Poland is represented for certain categories of visas, such as truck drivers, business visas. Austria and the Netherlands are represented on a case-by-case basis. Representation of France and Slovenia is frozen
7. Lithuania represents Greece only for official delegations and diplomatic passports. Representation of Latvia, Portugal and Czechia in Hrodna is frozen;
8. Slovakia represents Portugal.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the majority of EU Member states (MS) have limited resources and capacities for issuing visas since March. Visas are mainly issued for truck drivers and businesspersons.

During the reporting period, six LSC meetings were held (17, 24 and 29 January, 18 June, 9 September and 11 December 2020). Two meetings were held online due to COVID-19. The meetings are generally well attended – 10-14 MS attended the meetings in the reporting period. Bulgaria and Romania are invited to the LSC meetings and sometimes join.

As previously, EU Delegation (EUDEL) is organising and chairing LSC meetings. EUDEL draws up the meetings' reports and disseminates the draft among LSC members for comments before their final adoption. EUDEL asks MS for input to the meetings' agenda.

MS Consulates General outside Minsk are informed about the LSC meetings and related issues via e-mail (they receive meetings' agenda, reports, questions, etc).

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

Since the entry of the revised rules in February 2020, Member States reported no problems. The Visa Code is being implemented in a well-coordinated manner by the LSC states' consular offices located in Belarus, although the smooth implementation was significantly impacted by restrictions linked to COVID-19.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Commission Implementing Decision as regards the list of supporting documents to be submitted by visa applicants for short stay in Belarus (C(2020) 6149 final) was adopted on 11 September 2020. The implementation of the Decision, as agreed by MS, started on 21 September 2020. EUDEL shared RU version of the list with the LSC Group. EUMS consulates updated their websites accordingly and displayed clearly the information about the revised list.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The LSC Group has already started discussion on the adaptation of the standard rules for issuing MEVs as foreseen by Article 24 (2b) and (2d) of the Visa Code and taking into account Article 5 of the EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement. Member States have submitted their initial proposals, and further work on the adaptation of the cascade will continue in 2021.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Entry into force of the EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement helped ensure a harmonised approach, in particular in the area of visa fees.

Under the flexibilities offered by the Visa Code, the LSC Group agreed to apply the optional fee waivers set in Article 16.5 on a case-by-case basis. It may be applied to certain categories of applicants, including children under the age of 12.

The Group also agreed that paper copies of electronic medical travel insurance policies can be accepted by consulates provided that all necessary conditions are in place.

Member States do not see any need for additional harmonisation exercises at the moment.

3.5. Exchange of information

The LSC and EUDEL regularly shared relevant information in accordance with art 48.3 of the Visa Code. EUMS sent statistics to EUDEL on a quarterly basis. The regular exchange of information within the LSC covered implementation of the Visa Information System, use of VIS Mail, cases of fraud, travel medical insurance, but also bad practices such as "visa shopping" etc.

Due to COVID-19, the numbers of visa applications and, accordingly, issued visas are much lower compared to those from the last year. A number of national (D) visas have grown. Linked to COVID-19 restrictions, mostly business visas were issued as short-term visas. Refusal rate is very low, around 1% of the total number of applications. The political crisis in Belarus has its impact. Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have started since August 2020 to issue the so-called visas for humanitarian reasons for the Belarusian citizens suffering from political repressions. Latvia and Poland issue only D category visas. According to recent legislative changes in Poland, Belarusian citizens can work there on the basis of D visa. Amongst applicants, there is an increase in students and IT specialists. Also C type visas can be issued for humanitarian reasons by Lithuania, upon a special permission by the Minister of Interior.

No fraudulent trends were reported, except for a few cases with African students who attempted to forge documents when applying for visas in the consulate of France.

Member States started using VISMail in Belarus as of 31 January 2020. However, the system is not user-friendly (for example, it is complicated to attach documents), which makes its use cumbersome and complex.

4. Challenges

1. The EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) was signed on 8 January 2020 and entered into force on 1 July 2020. However, its implementation was seriously compromised by the pandemic, which resulted in entry restrictions to the EU. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the implementation of the Agreement.

After the revised Visa Code entered into force on 2 February 2020, the LSC Group had to solve the issue of temporary waiver of visa fees for the Belarusian citizens before the entry into force of the VFA. As a solution, the Group agreed to apply Article 16.6 of the Visa Code in individual cases to persons who fall within the categories of applicants for whom the visa fee is waived under Article 6.3 of the VFA.

2. During the next reporting period (2021), Member States expect surge in visa applications once the pandemic ends and the restrictions are lifted. In particular, the implementation of the revised Visa Code and the Visa Facilitation Agreement has been delayed, and their real impact and possible challenges will be only seen after the pandemic is over. Particular attention should be paid to those holders of newly issued biometric diplomatic passports, who were placed on the EU sanctions list in 2020.

The report was approved by the Member States on 25 January 2021.



UNION EUROPEENNE

DELEGATION EN REPUBLIQUE DU BENIN

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN (LSC) A COTONOU (BENIN) - RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

Quatre Etats membres sont représentés à Cotonou: l'Allemagne, la Belgique, la France et les Pays-Bas. Depuis le 1er juin 2015, seulement deux Etats Schengen ont des représentations diplomatiques habilitées à délivrer des visas à Cotonou: l'Allemagne et la France.

La France couvre les demandes de visas pour la Belgique, la République Tchèque, l'Estonie, la Grèce, l'Espagne, l'Italie, la Lituanie, la Lettonie, la Hongrie, Malte, l'Autriche, le Portugal et la Suisse.

Même si depuis le 1^{er} février 2018, le Bureau diplomatique de la Belgique est devenu une Ambassade, l'Ambassade de France reste en charge des visas Schengen, et le Consulat de Belgique à Abuja des visas de longue durée.

Depuis le 24 avril 2019, les demandes de visas réceptionnées par l'Ambassade des Pays-Bas sont traitées par un service central au sein du Ministère des affaires étrangères à La Haye

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

La Délégation de l'UE a assuré la Présidence et le Secrétariat du groupe LSC au Bénin pendant 7 ans, avant de passer le flambeau à la France fin 2019. Le groupe se réunissait en moyenne trois fois par an, mais en 2020, en raison de la crise liée au Covid-19, une seule réunion s'est tenue en décembre avec la participation des Etats membres et de la Suisse. Le rapport de réunion a été préparé par la France et validé par les EM. Chaque EM rapporte directement à son Siège.

La coordination LSC n'est pas assurée en dehors de Cotonou, car pour le moment, cela n'est pas nécessaire compte tenu des réalités du pays.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1. Application du Code des Visas

Les EM présents au Bénin appliquent le code des Visas en accord avec les instructions reçues par leurs autorités respectives. Les 2 EM délivrant des visas au cours de la période couverte par ce rapport utilisent le système VIS sans grandes difficultés à signaler.

Comme les années précédentes, la difficulté majeure à laquelle ont fait face les consulats portaient sur les cas de **fraude documentaire** (production de faux diplômes et fausses inscriptions dans le cadre de demandes de visa long séjour pour études).

La représentation de la Belgique à Abuja a rencontré des difficultés pour la vérification de documents présentés par des ressortissants Togolais (notamment des pièces d'état civil) qui soulèvent un certain nombre de doutes.

Dans le contexte de la crise sanitaire dont a découlé la suspension des accords de représentations, la section consulaire de l'Ambassade de France a quant à elle connu quelques difficultés avec les demandes de visas déposées par des marins béninois afin de connaître le lieu réel d'embarquement de ces marins qui cherchaient à rejoindre des ports européens autres que français.

3.2. Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

Le travail d'harmonisation de la liste de documents justificatifs est terminé et appliqué par les 2 EM. Les différents EM publient les documents sur leurs sites web.

3.3. Harmonisation des procédures

Les Etats membres ont procédé à une harmonisation de fait de la délivrance des visas de longue durée à entrées multiples: lors de la première demande, le visa est délivré pour une durée équivalente à la demande, si le demandeur fait plusieurs demandes par an un visa d'un an lui sera délivré, et par la suite il pourra bénéficier d'un visa de plusieurs années.

3.4. Echange d'informations

La réunion LSC de décembre 2020 a permis un échange d'informations entre les représentants des EM et de la Suisse sur la délivrance des visas Schengen à Cotonou pour l'année 2020, en particulier quant à l'impact de la COVID-19 sur le traitement et les statistiques: le nombre des visas délivrés et les taux de refus, l'arrêt de la délivrance des visas Schengen décidé par la France et par l'Allemagne le 17 mars 2020 (pour la France jusqu'en juillet et pour l'Allemagne jusque la mi-juin, avant l'introduction graduelle de catégories dérogatoires), la suspension corrélative des accords de représentations entre la France et les Etats qu'elle représente (dont la Suisse et la Belgique), les restrictions d'entrée et de séjour dans les pays respectifs. Les échanges ont aussi porté sur les conditions minimales exigées pour l'assurance médicale de voyage.

3.5. D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

N/A

4. Défis

Les défis suivant sont identifiés:

- Il convient de poursuivre la veille et la vigilance relative aux cas de fraude documentaire (surtout pour l'obtention de visas d'étudiants).

5. Divers

Rien de particulier à signaler

L'ensemble des Etats membres ont approuvé le présent rapport.



LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 17 EUMSs/SACs diplomatic missions present in BiH – Austria (AT), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Italy (IT), Hungary (HU), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Sweden (SE) and Norway (NO). In terms of visas, the consular section of NL covers Luxembourg (LU) and Belgium (BE), HU covers Lithuania (LT) and Estonia (EE), AT covers Malta (MT), SE covers Denmark (DK) and Slovenia covers Switzerland (CH) and Portugal (PT). The consular section of DE normally covers Latvia (LV) but during the pandemic this coverage is suspended. Even though BG, HR and RO are not yet part of the Schengen area, they have diplomatic missions in BiH and are invited to the LSC meetings.

In 2020, the number of visa applications and issued visas decreased due to Covid-19 restrictions introduced by most of the EUMSs/SACs.

In 2020 Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) retained visa-free regime without increased number of illegal BiH asylum applicants detected. Procurement and issuing of biometric passports to local citizens continued with no problems detected. However, since the current procurement expires in March 2022 for biometric passports and in June 2022 for other travel documents, we expect difficulties in tendering procedures that might affect document security policy following a positive legal framework. The BiH authorities' failure to act before the end of March 2021 might cause a delay in the later tendering procedure. Consequently, this might cause a delay in signing a procurement contract with an outsourcing company and in launching the passport/documents issuing procedure. As a reminder, inadequate procurement-related legal regulations affected biometric passports only, whilst this time it might affect all documents including the state ID cards, driving licenses, registrations, vehicle registration plates, cargo vehicles travel documentation, etc.

It is important to mention that BiH signed a readmission agreement with Pakistan, including implementing protocol, currently pending ratification. In addition, BiH experienced increased migratory influx in 2020 but without much influence on the implementation of visa policy.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

In 2020, the EU House (EU Delegation and EU Special Representative's Office) organized and hosted two on-line LSC meetings (26 October 2020 and 7 December 2020). The reason for this were Covid-19 travel restrictions and their implications on visa policies and consular operations in EUMSs and BiH. Despite this fact, the EU House properly informed EUMSs on security and humanitarian developments in BiH through different communication channels and meetings, while offering an active discussion between EUMS as well.

The LSC meetings were focused on current migratory trends and their impact on security and humanitarian situation, including an analysis of risk factors and indicators that might affect the security of EUMS/SAC personnel currently deployed in BiH.

Following the implementation of the Post-Visa Liberalization Monitoring Mechanism (PVLMM) benchmarks and the Visa Code, discussions especially included the implementation of:

1. Visa policy in BiH and its harmonization with the EU Acquis,
2. Document Security policy,
3. Integrated Border Management policy,
4. Migration and Asylum policies,
5. Fight against human smuggling/trafficking and other forms of cross-border major and organized crime.

The meetings were adequately attended having in mind current circumstances. The organisation of the meetings on-line gave an opportunity to involve also consuls from non-resident EUMSs accredited to BiH – e.g. Portugal or Ireland. All EUMSs were properly provided with LSC meeting reports for their potential comments and discussion proposals. Meetings were chaired by EUD and co-chaired by EUSR Office.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

EUMSs did not report any issues regarding the application of the EU Visa Code, including its recent changes [Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of 20 June 2019].

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EUMSs did not report any problems regarding the harmonization of documents and related practices.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No problems reported on application of Article 24 in the reporting period.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Based on information received from EUMS/SAC, all practices are harmonized to the highest possible extent following the Visa Code provisions.

3.5. Exchange of information

Statistics received suggest that EUMSs issued totally 42 single entry C visas, 75 multiple entry C visas and 333 long-term visas. EUMSs rejected totally 4 applications for single entry C visas and 11 multiple entry C visas. Such low numbers were caused by the implementation of the Covid-19 travel restrictions and their impact on consular operations of different EUMSs.

Communication with EUMS/SAC did not reveal any problems with travel medical insurance, cooperation with local authorities and companies.

Information exchanged in relation to the implementation of the PVLMM benchmarks included discussion on the following:

Visa policy in BiH

The situation in the BiH Diplomatic Consular Offices of BiH (DCO) concerning visa application and issuing processes was assessed as favourable. EUMSs/SACs were informed on two currently ongoing investigations, meaning “Pakistani visas case” and the “Amman case”.

EUMSs/SACs were also informed on recent happenings on procurement of “C” visa stickers and political stalemates in the MFA caused by alleged misunderstanding of terms “procurement” and “printing” and provisions of the Public Procurement Law (PPL). This issue might cause lack of “C” visas in DCOs once Covid19 restrictions are suspended and regular travel regime is restored.

Document Security policy

EUMSs/SACs were informed on a very specific situation related to the PPL, which represents the primary cause for this situation. Its provisions did not define biometric passports (and other documents) as special security category of products with a separate but still transparent tendering procedure. In this way, the state authorities do not have overview over the manufacturing and procurement processes but fully depend on outsourcing companies. Multiple complaint mechanisms of the PPL enable suspension of the tendering/selection procedure for over a year, which revealed multiple biometric passport issuing suspensions since visa-free regime between BiH and EU.

Integrated Border Management (IBM) policy

EUMSs/SACs were informed about the coming changes in the Law on Border Crossing Control (LBCC) and new legal solutions that will be incorporated as a result of further harmonization with the EU Acquis. Some of them will be jurisdiction over border crossings, definition of protection area around the border, obligation of transporters, definition of risk analysis and illegal border crossings, and storing of personal data.

EUMSs/SACs were informed about the implementation of the new IBM Strategy, coming changes in the Law on Foreigners and Law on Asylum for a better migration management. EUMSs/SACs were also updated on progress in the risk analysis area, international cooperation and the Joint Police Cooperation Centre, as well as statistics on human smuggling and human trafficking. The readmission agreement with Pakistan and the Model Status Agreement with EU/FRONTEX were just briefly explained in the context of current issues and contents of the agreements following the EU Acquis.

Migration policy

EUMSs were informed on the migratory and security trends in BiH followed by official statistics and analytical overview. Besides migrant smuggling issues the audience also discussed about correlation between migrants and human trafficking, implementation of readmission agreements with neighbouring countries (HR, SER and MNE) and use of regular procedure since accelerated procedure has been suspended for months now.

EUMSs/SACs were also informed on the return of foreigners to their countries of origin using the Assisted Voluntary Return mechanism with IOM.

EUMSs/SACs were updated on the coming changes in legal framework and humanitarian aspect of migration management.

In a security context, EUMSs/SACs were informed on the situation with the *Inter-Entity Border Line (IEBL)* between the Federation BiH and the Republika Srpska in the settlements of Novi Grad and Velecevo, set up by local authorities for preventing and discouraging migrants from further movement and stay to Una-Sana Canton and Republika Srpska respectively. However, the measures did not have a long-term effect because migrants found alternative ways to circumvent police checkpoints and patrols.

Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) policy

EUMSs/SACs were informed on the issues and importance of the Task Force for Fighting Human Trafficking (THB TF) as the only effective coordination mechanism in BiH. Besides, local authorities established the Network of Specialized Prosecutors and Investigators as a supporting instrument with its expertise to the THB Task Force.

EUMSs/SACs discussed the legal and strategic framework, as well as inter-agency cooperation improvement methods. Analysis emphasized the importance of proper implementation of the new THB Strategy and the adoption of action plans to be harmonized on the state level with the THB State Coordinator.

Witness Protection policy

EUMSs/SACs were informed that this policy is in the context of police cooperation and fight against organized crime. The main issue is the lack of precisely defined jurisdictions between authorities involved in extra-judiciary and judiciary witness protection.

4. Challenges

Response to challenges listed in the 2020 report:

1. On the improvement of the document security policy, the EU House had a constant liaison with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Agency for Identification Documents, Registers and Data Exchange (IDDEEA) for encouraging changes in the PPL and other appropriate solutions.

2. On the procurement of “C” visa stickers, the EU House had multiple talks with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for resolving issues on visa stickers’ procurement, subject to political stances/principles rather than factually grounded reasons.
3. The EU House conducted multiple talks with local authorities on reinitializing negotiations process for signing the Model Status Agreement (MSA) with EU/FRONTEX. The talks resulted in returning the case from the BiH Presidency to the Ministry of Security after two years of stalemate.
4. In 2019/2020, the EU House had intensive talks with local authorities on the adoption of missing legal and strategic framework for a more effective border and migration management. Efforts resulted in the adoption of strategies on integrated border management and human trafficking and initializing changes in LBCC, Law on Foreigners and Law on Asylum.

Subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021):

1. The EU House will closely liaise and monitor developments on PPL and effects on document security and visa policies in BiH.
2. The EU House will be actively engaged in the continuation of negotiations on the MSA with EU/FRONTEX, especially in further harmonization with the new EBCG Regulation of November 2019.
3. The EU House will be actively engaged in all developments of legal and strategic framework related to integrated border management and migration management policies.
4. The EU House will remain actively engaged in the current humanitarian aspects of the migratory movements while finding appropriate solutions for minimizing negative effects of current increased migratory influx in BiH.

5. Other issues

No issues of a specific importance raised by the EUMS/SAC in the reporting period.



28/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Bolivia 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Six Member States (MS) are present, i.e. France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Spain and Switzerland. Switzerland does not issue visas, France in specific cases (in the framework of privileged bilateral relations in the cultural, political, financial and business domains) and Sweden via its Embassy in Colombia.

20 MS are represented, i.e.

- Estonia (via Germany),
- Malta, Slovakia and Slovenia (via Italy),
- Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland (via Sweden),
- Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, The Netherlands, The Czech Republic and Switzerland (via Spain).

The General Consulate of Spain located in Santa Cruz is the only LSC consular section situated outside the Capital city of La Paz.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

During the reporting period, one regular LSC meeting was held in February and well attended. EU Delegation (EUDEL) chaired the meeting and drew up the meeting report.

With the arrival of the covid-pandemic to Bolivia in March, coordination of LSC was done on an ad hoc basis via informal exchanges, notably via email, telephone and whatsapp. Coordination with the General Consulate of Spain in Santa Cruz was ensured via the Spanish Embassy in La Paz.

The COVID-19 crisis affected Member States' visa operation, for example drastically reducing the visa requests for Germany as of March 2020. Germany nevertheless did not interrupt its service, but reduced office hours.

With the arrival of the covid-pandemic in Bolivia, the agreement the Spanish Embassy had with its Swiss and French counterparts on representation in the issuance of Schengen visas for Switzerland and France for Bolivian nationals has been suspended until further notice. All applications for Schengen visas to Switzerland must be submitted in person to the Andean Regional Consular Center in Lima - Peru, without exception. This decision has great repercussions for Bolivian citizens who need to travel to Switzerland for urgent reasons and must first travel to Peru for the issuance of the visa.

France suspended the issuance of long-term visas for foreigners without residence in France. France equally informed that short-term visas, demanded more during the pandemic, were rejected due to the closure of European borders.

As a consequence of the spread of the coronavirus and the Swedish Government's decision to introduce a temporary entry ban into Sweden, the Swedish Migration Agency decided that visa applications for Sweden should in principle be rejected (exceptions could be applied). The decision remains valid until further notice as long as the Swedish Government maintains its decision on a temporary entry ban.

Like other parts of society, the Swedish Migration Agency and Embassies worked to adapt their activities to help reduce the spread of the pandemic. Applicants were advised to contact the agency and Embassies primarily by phone, email or digitally rather than visiting the receptions of the Swedish Migration Board. Employees who can work from home were encouraged to do so.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUDEL are well prepared to ensure the tasks to be carried out in the LSC under the Visa Code. In principle, MS welcomed the clarity of the new Visa Code, adopted on 28 January and applicable since 2 February 2020.

Nevertheless, in the relevant LSC coordination meeting, two points of the new code were controversially discussed:

1. Reduction of the deadline for processing visa applications from 60 to 45 days: Spain criticized the decision to shorten the deadline, arguing that it was to the disadvantage of applicants. Germany agreed with the reduction of the deadline, arguing that most visa applications were resolved within a week anyways.
2. Standardized form to reject visa applications: Spain criticized the standardized list, arguing that it did not provide enough space for detailed explanations to applicants. Germany welcomed the standardized list arguing that it allowed a faster processing of applications.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The list of supporting documents was adopted on 24 October 2018 and – according to information provided by Member States – is applied for visa application procedures. A need to amend the list was not identified and Switzerland specifically expressed support for the list.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Several Member States informed having issued multiple entry visas (MEVs), for example for frequent travellers for family or business related reasons (Germany) or in general for study (Sweden, France) or research purposes (Sweden) as well as for voluntary work (Sweden) and for spouses of their own nationals (France).

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

There were no other initiatives aiming at harmonizing visa-issuing practices.

3.5. Exchange of information

The LSC meeting in February provided the opportunity to exchange information on the increased visa application rate since the Bolivian political crisis following the failed 2019 elections. Member States noted more fraud attempts based on fake documents and questionable reasoning for travel.

Under the covid-pandemic, information exchange was organised according to need and more spontaneously.

Not all Member States present in Bolivia have introduced the VIS system as of 2 February as foreseen.

3.6. Challenges in 2020

The 2018-2019 report described the falsification of financial documents as one of the main challenges for 2020, indicating that controls should be improved as well as cooperation with financial institutes, such as banks.

Sweden reported having continued to develop routines to detect and verify falsified documents as well as to establish contacts and routines with financial institutes to address this challenge. Germany reported only having been able to process Schengen visa applications in exceptional cases due to the pandemic, indicating that the falsification of documents had hence not been that relevant this year. France stated that no progress had been made to address the falsification of financial documents.

3.7. Expected challenges for 2021

The challenge to detect falsified documents will remain a challenge for 2021 as expressed by Germany and Sweden.

The handling of visa applications in 2021 was described as challenging in general. Germany expects travel restrictions to persist at least in the first months of 2021, resulting in a reduced number of visa applications. Nevertheless, according to Germany, handling each case will take more time than usual, given that visa rules change regularly and are sometimes difficult to apply. Sweden expects an increase of visa applications should the covid-situation improve.

In addition, France identified as future challenge the reactivation of the agreement with the Spanish Embassy on representation in the issuance of Schengen visas for Bolivian nationals once the European borders re-open.

4. Other issues

N/A

The report has been approved by LSC members present in La Paz via written procedure.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF BOTSWANA AND SADC

01 /02/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Botswana 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Two Member States (DE and FR) are present with Embassies in Gaborone. France has no consular competence. Most EUMS are side-accredited from South Africa, Namibia, or Mozambique, with Honorary Consuls in Botswana.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation was as follows:

Only visas for the Schengen countries represented by Germany in Botswana (Germany, Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Luxemburg, Malta, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland) can be obtained in Gaborone. Applications for most other Schengen countries are in Johannesburg/Pretoria, but a few can be much farther (e.g. Namibia for Spain, Mozambique for Italy, Egypt for Slovenia). There are ongoing negotiations between Botswana and several Schengen countries for visa exemption for diplomatic and service passports. The issue comes up regularly in our contacts with the Botswana authorities.

There are little to no problems with visa applications of Botswana citizens. Other than an occasional student visa, most applications are short-term visas.

In addition to challenges for Botswana citizens, and since Gaborone is the seat of the SADC Secretariat, we regularly face difficulties with visa applications of SADC Secretariat personnel traveling on (last-minute) mission to European countries without local Schengen representation.

After the beginning of the pandemic, all MS have suspended the representation by Germany, leaving the German Embassy to issue Schengen visas only for Germany. The German Embassy is working with an external service provider for the collection of Schengen visa applications.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

No formal LSC meetings have been held, also due to the COVID-19 restrictions, but the main reason being that only one MS issues Schengen visa. Information is exchanged whenever needed.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

See under 3.3

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

N/A since only one MS issues visas.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Germany applies the Article 24(2) in principle as such. The minimum requirements can be waived in the following cases:

- a justified interest of Germany or another MS, for example senior members of government or officials (President, Minister, Chief of Protocol, etc.),
- the applicant has carried out investments in one of the MS and is considered to be able to cover the costs for multiple travels into the Schengen area, during the remainder of the validity of the visa, for example a South African citizen resident in Botswana who is building a hotel in Malta,
- spouses of EU citizens resident in Botswana, who demonstrably and regularly travel into the Schengen area for visits.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

N/A

3.5. Exchange of information

There is no formal exchange of information, given that Germany is the only representation in Botswana which issues visa. No cases of fraud have occurred in recent times. Submitted local TMIs are normally in order and are recognised if they fulfil all the requested criteria. Implementation of the TMI rules has been unproblematic. The German Embassy is not cooperating with local authorities or companies. Since March 2020, Schengen visa applications have been collected via an external service provider, the cooperation with whom has so far been satisfying. VISMail and VIS are seldom used, except in cases where it is appropriate.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

The following challenge was listed in the 2018-2019 report: Several members of the COAFR working group had asked the EU Delegation and MS to look into solutions for issuing visas for applicants travelling to Schengen countries not represented in Botswana. Discussions are ongoing.

The issue has not been solved. Botswana is a vast country the size of France. Thus visa applications from rural areas present a significant challenge, especially if travel abroad for the visa, e.g. to Pretoria/Johannesburg is required.

The aspects of private visa facilitation offices (VFS etc) in Gaborone should be further investigated.

5. Other issues

An LSC meeting in Pretoria to include non-resident MS Embassies could be envisaged if the situation with regard to the pandemic improved.

The Delegation reports upon instruction weekly on the Council recommendation on the lifting of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, sharing information with EEAS HQ on the situation related to the pandemic.

The report has been approved by all Schengen Member States resident in Botswana.



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO BRAZIL

31/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Brazil 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

24 Member States are present in Brazil and 23 have a representation in the capital, Brasilia. There is one Member State present only outside the capital: Lithuania with a General Consulate in São Paulo but no Embassy in Brasilia.

21 Schengen MS Embassies (or Schengen associated MS), and 4 MS that are not applying the common policy in full, are invited to the LSC meetings organized by EU DEL.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

From January to December 2020, **19 LSC meetings** were held in the capital Brasilia and always chaired by EU DEL. Among the meetings, **18 were dedicated to the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular regard to stranded citizens and available flights and other transport means.** Apart for the meeting in January, all the others were held by VTC (Webex system used by the EU) that also allowed the participation of Member States not physically present in Brazil (Estonia, Latvia and Malta). All meetings well very well attended (around 75%) even, when by VTC, by colleagues located in other areas (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro). In some meetings, during the crisis' peak, UCPM members like North Macedonia and Serbia , and the United Kingdom, were also invited to participate. Minutes are drafted by EU DEL and then sent for information to MS and Schengen associated states. Any further follow up is dealt with by the chair. Member States draft their own reports to their capitals. The consular WhatsApp group created by the EU Delegation for consular colleagues in Brasilia proved to be an essential tool to exchange information rapidly in between meetings.

Due to the **continental size of Brazil and the limited resources of EU DEL**, it is challenging to coordinate LSC in all the cities where Member States have their consular representations (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Recife, Curitiba, Salvador, Belem, Fortaleza and Belo Horizonte). However, since 2018, EU DEL has participated/organized LSC meetings in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Recife (started in 2019), and consolidated then the practice outside the capital of LSC meetings. Because of the pandemics in 2020, there was no possibilities to organize presential meetings, but the EU Delegation is part of the consular WhatsApp groups for São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

On the **guidance for a phased and coordinated resumption of visa operations during 2020**, EU DEL informed Member States about information received to facilitate and structure exchanges and coordination in LSC. Some issues were already covered during the year such as the information on the local epidemiological situation; quarantine measures; availability of international travel connections; state play of and exchange of experiences with resumption of visa operations; measures taken to limit physical and even information on suspension/resumption of representation arrangements.

In 2020, due to the sanitary conditions linked to the pandemics, **most of the Member States operated only for emergency case and for nationals (emergency travel documents)**. Few visas (national ones for students, familiar reunion, searchers, temporary transfer if workers within a firm; independent/start-up activity; humanitarian cases, specialised staff (e.g. nurses, engineers)) were issued. In June 2020, Member States replied the questionnaire on the guidance for a phased and coordinated resumption of visa operations including:

- Challenges for the resumption of operations in Brazil during the year (temporarily closure of consulates, suspension of some representations agreements, reopening or not of the Visa Facilitation Services/VFS Office);
- Additional hygiene measures taken (home-office, rotative work, protective equipment);
- Possible changes to the application procedure (purchase of some products by bank transfer directly to the Member States' ministry, E-Visa portal)

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

Due to the **EU-Brazil Schengen visa waiver agreement**, Schengen visa-related problems do not constitute a major issue in the local consular work. The Visa Information System (VIS) is fully implemented in Brazil. The requirement for collecting biometric details means that in some cases, visa applicants need to travel further to ensure this requirement.

Member States apply different exchange rates and also update them with different regularity, mostly according to instructions from their capitals, which makes it difficult to have one uniform visa fee in the local currency. However, the differences in fees are not significant and they do not lead to visa shopping.

Member States were informed that, after the adoption on 28 January 2020 of the first Visa Code Handbook (taking account of the revision of the Visa Code), the Handbook for the administrative management of visa processing and local Schengen cooperation (Visa Code Handbook II) was adopted on 25 March 2020.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

COM adopted the **decision on harmonised list of supporting documents for Brazil in September 2016**. Member States are currently monitoring the harmonisation of practices. So far there is no need stated by Member States to amend the existing list.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Due to the pandemic, the demand was not so high. However some Member States, with all the conditions fulfilled, encourage the deliverance multiple-entry visas under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades').

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

So far no harmonisation of practices has taken place. Most of the visas issued takes place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, followed by Brasilia.

3.5. Exchange of information

The exchange of information within the LSC group is working very well. **EU DEL regularly updates Member States on Schengen acquis** and all legal developments in this area taking place in Brussels. **In 2020, no exercise of compiling local statistics for the worldwide statistics exercise was made.** EU DEL is also responsible for distributing data bases of EU MS consular offices in Brazil, as well as any other relevant Schengen information.

Almost all the Member States maintain regular working contacts between themselves (partly thanks to their close cooperation in consular issues). The EU DEL is included in the exchange of consular information between the Member States, both in Schengen and in consular issues.

The flow of information between Member States' Embassies and Consulates located outside Brasilia could be challenging. The EU DEL, upon request, shares information with the consular offices outside the capital, including using dedicated WhatsApp Group.

Tentative of possible visa shopping and cases of fraud documents are also shared between all Member States and EU DEL. Some Member States have observed that changes in the modus operandi from various visa sections are quickly noticed by local community and spread around. This information turns out to be relevant for third national in Brazil, in their attempts to use visa shopping or some causes of fake documents, especially financial statements.

In November 2019, there was a consensual agreement between Member States to have the **1st January 2020 as the date from which VIS Mail would be used by all MS** and communication of applicant data by non-encrypted email will stop.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Not applicable

4. Challenges

On the **questions from Brazilian nationals about a possibility to remain as a tourist within different Schengen States for more than 90 days** (which is not possible under the EU-Brazil Schengen visa waiver agreement), because of the pandemic situation in 2020, the question was less relevant. In Brazil, in principle, the period of stay of EU citizens cannot be extended either. In November 2020, the Brazilian Federal Police resumed the migration terms that were suspended since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 context. As limited slots offered to migrants to regularize their situation, the Federal Police would remain indulgent towards possible complex situations.

It remains a **challenge to launch and better coordinate LSC in locations outside Brasilia** but could be facilitated by existing tools such as Videoconferences (VTC). So far, when possible, São Paulo has the leading experience with presential regular meetings organized. In addition, other locations will require close monitoring with local rotating chairs. There are a large number of Member States with consular offices outside the capital and some of them – Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo-, with larger numbers in terms of visas and Schengen-related issues, than in Brasilia.

Other themes could be also interesting to be assessed in 2021 such as: the trends in the numbers of visa applications; applicants' profile (possible new trends); deadlines set by the Visa Code; possible impact of new procedures (fraud) and external service providers' capacity.

Also, as EUDEL and some Member States received many questions about the **European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS)**, it would be useful to make a timely outreach towards Brazilian authorities as non-EU nationals who do not need a visa to travel to the Schengen area, as it is the case for Brazil, will have to apply for a travel authorisation through the ETIAS system prior to their trip.

5. Other issues

The Schengen group in Brasilia is composed of 24 Members and it is a very heterogeneous group in terms of acquaintance with Schengen acquis. Since the visa waiver programme is working fine and no major problems arise, Member States tend to focus more on consular protection.



UNION EUROPEENNE

DELEGATION AU BURKINA FASO

Ouagadougou, le 12 mars 2021

**COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN
ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) AU BURKINA FASO**

RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

Au total, 9 Etats membres de l'Union européenne sont actuellement représentés au Burkina Faso : l'Allemagne, l'Autriche, la Belgique, le Danemark, la France, l'Italie, le Luxembourg, les Pays Bas et la Suède. L'Espagne a un Consul honoraire sur place. Chacun de ces Etats membres a sa représentation dans la capitale burkinabè, Ouagadougou. L'Allemagne, la Belgique, le Danemark, la France et l'Italie offrent des services consulaires.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

Au cours de l'année 2020, environ onze (11) réunions consulaires ont eu lieu, notamment en raison de la pandémie COVID, du besoin d'assurer des vols de répartition et d'assurer la sécurité des ressortissants UE dans un contexte sécuritaire délicat (incluant la période des élections présidentielles et législatives qui ont eu lieu le 22 novembre 2020). La plupart des Etats membres présents y ont participé. certains ont parfois été représentés par les Ambassadeurs + consuls + experts sécurité. La Présidence dans ces réunions a été assurée par la DUE.

Occasionnellement, certains pays amis ont été invités et pris part à ces réunions (USA, Canada, Japon, Suisse).

Les sujets habituellement traités ont été des questions de protection consulaire, incluant le rapport avec les citoyens UE non-représentés au Burkina Faso ainsi que les questions touchant à la sécurité des ressortissants de l'UE. Les agendas et rapports ont été préparés par la DUE. La coordination des questions consulaires s'est toujours passée à Ouagadougou.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1. Application du Code des Visas

Les Etats membres avec capacité consulaire n'ont pas eu de problèmes particuliers pour l'application du Code des Visas. La coopération entre les Etats-membres est fluide.

La fermeture des frontières et les restrictions de voyage ont fait chuter le nombre de demandes de visa (et les recettes de notre prestataire de service qui a dû considérablement réduire son activité). Un effort particulier a dû être fourni pour répondre aux nombreuses interrogations du public suite à l'évolution des restrictions sanitaires. Par ailleurs, les accords de représentation en matière de délivrance de visa Schengen ont été suspendus.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

Les travaux d'harmonisation n'ont pas encore été finalisés. Ils sont en cours.

3.3 Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

Des visas de circulation sont délivrés aux demandeurs ayant déjà obtenu un visa (et l'ayant utilisé), justifiant de leur besoin d'effectuer plusieurs séjours dans un des Etats membres sur une longue durée et possédant les ressources nécessaires.

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

Un dialogue approfondi sur l'harmonisation de procédures reste nécessaire. Le sujet sera traité lors de la prochaine réunion consulaire prévue en avril 2021.

3.5 Echange d'informations

En raison de la crise sanitaire, la délivrance de visas s'est fortement réduite. À titre d'exemple, en 2020 la France (l'EM le plus actif en matière de visas) a délivré 2 465 visas, dont 1 561 visas Schengen. Lors de la réunion consulaire d'avril, des statistiques seront demandées concernant l'octroi de visas au cours du premier trimestre 2021.

Le Burkina Faso semble peu sujet aux fraudes sur les titres d'identité et de voyage. En revanche, les EM ont identifié quelques cas de faux relevés bancaires, fiches de paie et inscriptions à Caisse Nationale de la Sécurité Sociale (CNSS).

Les EM n'ont pas identifié de problème concernant les assurances de voyage proposées par les compagnies d'assurance de la place.

Par ailleurs les systèmes VISMail/Visa Information System sont utilisés sur place.

3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Rien de particulier à signaler.

4 Défis et questions à court terme

L'articulation entre la gestion des mesures sanitaires et des restrictions de voyage reste cruciale. Dans ce contexte, il faut poursuivre les échanges d'information concernant l'évolution de la pandémie et des mesures sanitaires des Etats membres, en particulier la France. En effet, le seul vol direct vers l'espace Schengen est actuellement assuré par Air France, ce qui implique nécessairement l'entrée ou le transit sur le territoire français, même si la destination finale est un autre Etat-membre Schengen.



Janvier /Décembre 2020

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) AU BURUNDI RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

17 Etats Membres sont présents et 4 sont représentés au Burundi.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

Dans son activité de représentation, le traitement de visas est pris en charge par la Belgique compte tenu des spécificités tels qu'indiqués dans les accords de représentation. Il s'agit principalement des documents propres à chaque pays concernant la preuve de logement et la preuve de solvabilité. La Belgique a souscrit des accords de représentation pour délivrance visa Schengen au Burundi avec 17 pays européens dont seulement la France, les Pays Bas et l'Allemagne sont représentés au Burundi sans que ces derniers aient des compétences au titre de Schengen. Suite à la crise COVID-19, cette coopération a été suspendue à partir du 09/09/2020 permettant seulement le traitement de visas ad hoc, sur la demande explicite et l'accord de l'EM représenté. Pour l'Espagne seulement, l'accord de représentation a été reconduit le 25/11/2020. Cette situation particulière qui prévaut au Burundi et en l'absence de postes consulaires, l'organisation des réunions dans le cadre de LSC est sans objet.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1. Application du Code des Visas

L'absence d'EM ayant compétence en matière de visa Schengen et donc la quasi monopolisation de délivrance Schengen sur le territoire burundais rendent la question d'application du Code des Visas sans objet.

3.2. Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

On ne peut estimer le besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs, on fait face à l'absence d'un EM ayant compétence en matière de visa Schengen.

3.3. Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

La réglementation conformément à l'Article 24 (2) du Code des Visa est respectée pour ce qui est la délivrance de visas à entrées multiples d'une durée de 2 voire 3 ans. Toutefois, vu le risque important d'immigration illégale- demande d'asile dans les pays européens, la délivrance de visas à

entrées multiples au-delà des 3 ans est limitée et très rarement appliquée. Pour les raisons ci-dessus énoncées (points 3.1 et 3.2), ceci n'a pas fait l'objet d'une concertation dans le cadre LSC.

3.4. Harmonisation des procédures

Aucune initiative n'est à signaler en raison de la situation ci-haut citée.

3.5. Echange d'informations

La Belgique ayant le monopole local sur la délivrance de visas Schengen et donc vu l'absence des représentations d'EM ayant compétence au titre de la délivrance de visa Schengen, l'échange d'information LSC ne peut avoir lieu au Burundi.

3.6. D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

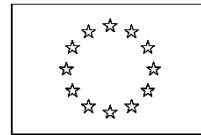
Aucune

4. Défis

Aucun commentaire

5. Divers

Aucun



31 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Ottawa, Canada 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

25 EU Member States, together with Switzerland, Iceland and Norway, are represented in Ottawa. Luxembourg and Malta do not have embassies in Ottawa. Luxembourg has an Honorary Consul and is also represented by Belgium. Malta has a Consul General in Toronto. UK does not participate to any EU coordination groups since 2019.

Many Member States have an established network of Consulates in other large Canadian cities, with a bulk of their consular and Schengen visa work conducted in the large metropolitan areas of Toronto and Montreal, as well as in Vancouver. Some MS are present as well in Quebec, Calgary and/or Edmonton. Honorary Consuls are present throughout many other Canadian cities.

Member States have ad-hoc cooperation agreements allowing one Member State to issue visas on behalf of another. This system has been however vastly suspended during the COVID19 pandemic and its consequent travelling restrictions.

Several member states have also engaged with private companies to handle the receipt of visa applications, including recording biometric. Several Schengen visa hubs have been established in major cities across Canada at this point. In an effort to centralise visa processing regionally, some member states have also reorganised internally and now conduct the processing of visas at their missions in the US, while the physical aspects of this process (sticker print, shipping, etc.) remains at the local missions in Canada.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

COVID-19 crisis' impact on Member States' visa operations and on the whole LSC was profound. Only one dedicated LSC meeting took place before the start of the pandemic (in February 2020), and since March 2020 all meetings have been organised online. Until summer 2020, they were organised jointly with LCC, and later as separate parts of the joint agendas. Overall, more than 20 LCC and LSC meetings took place in the course of 2020 with the regular participation of the outside parties who were invited to give presentations to Consular and Schengen groups on topics of interest. In 2020 nearly all of them were related to the pandemic, with the guests representing the GAC (nearly each meeting), Federal and provincial protocols, Canada's consular services, Immigration, Transport, Health, Airlines, etc.).

All meetings LCC/LSC have been fantastically attended (practically 100 % of EU and Schengen countries). The overall coordination has been extended beyond the capital, with regular participation to all meetings and frequent daily contact/exchanges with consulates in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

The meetings have been chaired jointly by the EU Delegation and the EU Presidency of the Council (Croatia in the first semester – from the Consulate in Ottawa, followed by Germany – from the Consulate in Toronto). Reporting has been done jointly by the EU DEL and the Presidencies. The Group exchanges information by email, chat groups as well as through AGORA.

Except for the EU and Schengen states, no other countries participated, though some contact was maintained – mainly on the COVID-19 related topics, with Northern Macedonia, Serbia and the UK.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUD's preparedness to ensure the tasks to be carried out in LSC under the Visa Code:

Most MS assess the “unification” of their work under the VISA Code as rather advanced, though there are some elements that still require fine-tuning:

- full and commonly applied usage of the visa application form in line with the amended Visa Code;
- discrepancies in the requirements for fingerprints' taking in the re-applications (theoretically the applicants should be allowed to submit their applications by mail if their fingerprints were taken for a prior application within the last 59 months);
- discrepancies in requirements of the number of passport photos (one or two);
- existence of additional declarations to be signed (or questionnaires to be filled in) by applicants - in addition to the main application form (the decision-making process is to be based exclusively on the application form) and the supporting documents as mentioned in the harmonized list of documents. Within the framework of the LSC Schengen, partners can still agree on additional forms to be used by all Schengen partners.

Specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code as discussed in the LSC meetings, focusing on the revised rules applicable since February 2020:

Due to the COVID-19 and other consular necessities, no dedicated discussion has been conducted on this particular point. The MS inform however that they implemented the requirement that every visa section has to introduce organisational measures for visa complaints to be submitted, documented and processed in the way required by the Visa Code.

MS have also started to implement the lenient procedure to issue visas with longer validity (MEV cascades) if an applicant meets the requirements. Some of them have observed examples where these visas caused new problems, especially in cases where applicants enter a MS during the last months of their long-term visa and cannot return to their home country or to their former country of residence (which may be an issue with refugees). Some other countries reported however, that upon the history available in C-VIS, as well as the physical stickers in current and previous passports, they are able to deal with these situations.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Commission Implementing Decision on the Harmonised List was adopted in 2019. The LSC group is informed that the approved list is mandatory and must be advertised on the Embassies websites. Theoretically, the usage of harmonized documents is/should be followed, but obviously, the activities of 2020 were dedicated to issues other than rigid observance of the application of the list.

Concerning the list, the MS are rather satisfied and see a need for its review/verification only in some mid-term perspective.

Despite the harmonized list of documents, there are apparently still some discrepancies in practice, for example with regard to the validities of the residence permits when deciding about the date of expiry of a visa (minimum validity of the PR card vis-à-vis the date of expiry of the Schengen visa). The issue may be discussed later in the year.

A very specific problem was obviously caused by ad-hoc introductions of various national protective and restrictive measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The consular work in 2020 was dominated by attempts to catch up with the ever-changing regulations of the MS, restrictions imposed between them as well as between them and the third countries. The LSC often daily informal bilateral contracts had to be used to maintain the coherence of the system.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

As mentioned, the rules are being applied, but some new problems occurred in cases where the applicants for these visas changed their place of residence or went to the EU towards the end of validity of their Schengen visa and were unable to change their status there. The problem is rare and usually related to person for refuge countries, but it may require a better clarification of the conditions under which the status under the Schengen visa with a longer validity will be maintained in case of changing the place of residence.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

All MS see the value added of keeping each other closely informed about potential visa shopping, especially caused by different regulations on processing of applications during the specific time of the pandemic (i.e. limiting visa services to persons holding a permanent resident status but not regular work/ study permits).

With the introduction of new security measures and various national COVID19 restrictions, individual cases of applications aiming at circumventing the regulations in place in some countries were observed.

3.5. Exchange of information

2019 **statistics** were exchanged at the beginning of 2020. Due to the COVID-19, concentration of consuls on the repatriation flights and a longer break in any visa services, statistics were not compiled regularly throughout the year until December 2020, when they were collected and distributed for the first three quarters of 2020. Due to the small numbers of visas issued in 2020, no profound discussion was dedicated (or demanded by MS) to this topic. More work on statistics is

expected in 2021, when they will be exchanged regularly. A special appeal was made to the MS to closely follow this topic.

No cases of fraud were reported to the EU DEL or brought to a broad LSC forum, probably due to the very limited visa activity, extraordinary border controls and limited travel opportunity. Some individual exchanges may have taken place directly between some MS as the LSC (and LCC) allows also for such contacts.

TMIs have not been discussed much in the context of traveling impacted by the COVID pandemic. Despite the large number of cases of flight cancellations, boarding refusals, etc. – none of these cases have been related to the TMIs.

Throughout the year, a very close collaboration has been assured with various Canadian ministerial departments (Immigration, Transport, Border Security, Health, etc.) as well as airlines, especially Air Canada, Lufthansa and Air France. Representatives of airlines have been regularly attending the LCC/LSC and the Group was sharing with them all new travel updates as well as carried out interventions in individual cases. Global Affairs Canada was present to 90 % of the meetings (consular, political, travel issues).

Due to the specificity of the year, no activities were undertaken with regard to external service providers (topic was discussed at the end of 2019). The LSC concentrated rather on exchanges of practices concerning the delivery of services in the pandemic conditions, ongoing lockdowns and other working limitations.

The VISMail and the Visa Information System are used by MS, though not very frequently.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Throughout the year, the Group took special care of updating the members on all regulations with regard to the EU-Canada travels and transits. In this regard, updated contacts and information tables were circulated; and email, Whatsapp and Signal groups established and regularly used for informal contact and immediate consultation.

EUDEL regular reporting on the COVID-19 situation is continuously shared among the Group Members, and the LCC/LSC became in practice also the COVID-19 EU coordination group being directly tasked and consulted by the HoMS

4. Challenges

The acceptance by the Member States of the Canadian "blue" travel document for refugees (1951 Convention) with or without a visa was still discussed at the beginning of the year. It will require another discussion after the return to more regular travel.

Possible discrepancies between the national practices vis-à-vis entry into various MS will remain a problem during the pandemic. However, the coordination between the MS is well advanced and the consuls usually manage to solve in practice all arising problems.

5. Other issues

This report has been approved by Member States participation at the LSC in Ottawa.



UNION EUROPEENNE

DELEGATION EN REPUBLIQUE DEMOCRATIQUE DU CONGO

Kinshasa, 11/03/2021

**COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET
LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC)**

République Démocratique du Congo – Rapport 2020

1. Introduction

Onze⁴ états membres de l'espace Schengen ont une présence diplomatique en République Démocratique du Congo. Pour les questions de visas court séjour, BE représente dix-huit (PL depuis 01/02/2021) ambassades et/ou consulats⁵ en matière de visas de court séjour, à travers le Centre Européen des Visas (« CEV ») à Kinshasa (www.cev-kin.eu). Le Consulat général de Belgique à Lubumbashi représente quinze Etats Schengen également en matière de visa.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

En date du 18/03/2020 le CEV a été fermé suite à la fermeture des frontières extérieures de l'espace Schengen. Le CEV est resté fermé durant 2020 sauf pour les demandes de long séjour en BE et des catégories restreintes de demandes de court séjour. Il y avait une réunion en janvier 2020 sur la coopération locale puis une autre en septembre 2020 sur les mesures COVID-19. La collaboration entre partenaires a continué « ad hoc » pour des dossiers individuels ou les restrictions de voyage nationales, et ce de manière virtuelle (meeting webcam, mail, téléphone, messagerie).

3. Etat des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

En 2019, le CEV a traité plus de 25.000 demandes de visa, principalement à destination de la France et la Belgique. En 2020, à cause de la pandémie COVID-19, seulement 3.768 visas de court séjour et 634 visas de long séjour en BE ont été délivrés.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs.

Les états membres qui sont représentés par BE assurent une harmonisation des documents justificatifs. Cette harmonisation doit être poursuivie avec les autres Etats de l'espace Schengen non représentés. Cela est un point qui a été abordé pendant les réunions LSC en 2019. Il y a eu un léger alignement entre la liste locale BE et les listes GR, ES et CH, mais il n'y a pas encore de liste commune approuvée au niveau des partenaires.

⁴ BE, DE, CH, GR, ES, FR, IT, NL, NO, PT, SE.

⁵ AT, BE, DE, ET, FI, FR, HU, IT, LT, LV, LU, NO, NL, PL, PT, SK, CZ, SI, SE.

3.3 Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

BE a comme objectif de délivrer le plus de visas à entrées multiples que possible pour faciliter les déplacements des demandeurs connus. En 2020, le nombre de visas à entrées multiples était très limité puisque la plupart des visas ont été des visas ponctuels à cause des restrictions de voyage. Pour avoir une idée, en 2019, 7.757 visas de court séjour ont été délivrés à deux ou multiples entrées sur un total de 17.542 visas de court séjour délivrés, soit 44%.

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

Depuis la crise COVID-19, l'UE a recommandé de temporairement suspendre la représentation locale. DE est le seul pays représenté qui a explicitement demandé de suspendre la représentation à Kinshasa. Le CEV a délivré des courts séjours au cas par cas, tout en tenant compte des restrictions nationales et sur base d'une approbation explicite des partenaires.

3.5 Echange d'informations

En 2020, les communications entre partenaires ont principalement eu lieu sur la fermeture des frontières, la fraude documentaire, les dossiers de demandeurs d'asile, les restrictions de voyage et des demandes de visa recevables.

3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Aucune initiative significative n'a été entreprise à cause de la pandémie COVID-19. Une collaboration particulière et unique a été celle des vols de rapatriement vers Schengen de nationaux bloqués entre mars et juin 2020.

4. Défis

Le défi principal en 2021 sera la réouverture (partielle) des frontières et la gestion du volume de demandes au niveau du CEV et de l'ambassade BE. Les partenaires pourraient interpeller BE pour des priorités (intérêt national) et BE tentera de donner une suite favorable à ces demandes dans la mesure du possible (avancement de la date du rendez-vous). La lutte contre la fraude documentaire reste également une priorité et les DVO actifs à l'ambassade sont en contact avec les partenaires et les autorités compétentes pour rassembler les informations utiles.

5. Divers

BE entretient régulièrement le site web officiel www.cev-kin.eu ainsi que la page Facebook du CEV : <https://www.facebook.com/cevkinshasa>.



28 janvier 2021

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) EN CÔTE D'IVOIRE RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

Six Etats membres de l'espace Schengen (BE, CH, DE, ES, FR, IT) sont présents et délivrent des visas et cinq (AT, LU, NL, PT, SE) sont représentés en Côte d'Ivoire sur le plan consulaire en temps normal.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

La crise du Covid-19 a fortement affecté les opérations de délivrance de visas des Etats membres. Une réunion de la LSC a eu lieu le 6 février 2020 sous la présidence du représentant de la DUE, qui produit les projets de compte-rendu. L'ensemble des Etats membres étaient représentés, comme c'est toujours le cas. Par la suite, la fermeture des frontières a conduit à la quasi extinction de la délivrance de visas et la coordination consulaire s'est focalisée sur l'évacuation des citoyens européens de passage et des résidents nécessitant de quitter le pays. Des réunions portant sur les conditions de sécurité ou d'autres thématiques consulaires ont par ailleurs eu lieu au cours de l'année. Quelques démarches concernant les conditions d'entrée et sortie du pays ont eu lieu, coordonnées soit par la DUE, soit par la présidence allemande.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1. Application du Code des Visas

Les consulats sont apparus suffisamment informés en amont de la mise en œuvre du Code des Visas. De l'avis des intéressés, le faible nombre de visas Schengen délivrés depuis lors n'a pas fait apparaître de problème particulier.

3.2. Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

Même si l'harmonisation des listes n'a pas été officiellement formalisée, les EM présents considèrent que l'harmonisation est déjà réalisée en pratique.

3.3. Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

Le contexte particulier n'a pas permis de tester en « grandeur nature » les nouvelles règles en matière de « cascades MEV » mais leur adaptation est perçue positivement par les consulats des Etats membres.

3.4. Harmonisation des procédures

Des échanges réguliers ont lieu concernant les modes de vérification des pièces justificatives. Les consulats ont chacun leurs propres méthodes. Cela ne pose pas de problème significatif. De très légers écarts de tarif entre consulats Schengen existent, mais ils ne paraissent pas problématiques.

3.5. Echange d'informations

L'échange d'informations dans le cadre des réunions LSC inclut en temps normal:

- partage des statistiques
- cas de fraude
- coopération avec les autorités locales et les compagnies locales
- utilisation du VISMail et du Visa Information System
- offre de formation concernant la fraude documentaire

4. Défis

Le principal défi pour 2021 portera sur la relance de l'activité visas (à plein régime) dans l'hypothèse d'une levée des restrictions des déplacements internationaux. Indépendamment de cela, l'identification des faux documents reste un défi d'envergure, de même que la lutte contre l'immigration illégale et contre la traite et le trafic d'êtres humains sous toutes ses formes.



16th March 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are seven EUMSs/SACs diplomatic missions present in DR – Austria (AT, only a Consulate), Germany (DE), Spain (ES), France (FR), Italy (IT), the Netherlands (NL) and Switzerland (CH). EUMSs/SACs not present in the DR are invited to join all Schengen Cooperation Meetings virtually.

In terms of visas, NL covers Luxembourg (LU), Belgium (BE), and Finland (FI); FR covers Denmark (DK); DE covers Poland (PL); Spain covers Portugal (PT), Greece, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Sweden and Malta. Switzerland covers Austria (A), Slovenia (SI) and Principality of Liechtenstein (FL). Several EUMSs have outsourced visa applications, including biometric recording. In an effort to centralise visa processing regionally, some EUMSs reorganised internally and now conduct the processing of visas at their larger missions - for example the US-, while the physical aspects of this process (sticker print, shipping, etc.) remains at either the local missions, or outsourced companies in Santo Domingo.

In 2020, the number of visa applications and issued visas decreased due to Covid-19 restrictions introduced by most of the EUMSs/SACs.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on EUMSs/SACs visa operations has been profound. Numbers have drastically dropped: during the last months of 2020, EUMSs/SACs only issued visas in case of medical/family emergencies or based on other humanitarian grounds.

The impact was also clearly seen in the coordination of LSC meetings. In 2020 there were three LCC/LSC meetings organized: on March 4th (by EUDEL), on September 1st (by DE), and on December 15th (by EUDEL). Meetings were generally well attended, with virtual assistance from several EUMSs not represented in the DR. There has been active participation via email discussion and active cooperation with the local group. Since the Schengen area has remained practically closed during this time, with very little issue of Schengen visas, most of the exchanges have been related to emergency cases for visas or COVID-related questions.

LCC/LSC meetings focussed on the effects of the sanitary crisis on both consular and Schengen Cooperation level, organizing the meetings back to back.

The meetings have been chaired by the EU Delegation. Reporting has been done by the EU DEL. Due to the high number of EU tourists stranded in the DR, as well as associated countries, active

participation from Northern Macedonia, Serbia and the UK, as like-minded countries were maintained – mainly for COVID-19 related topics, and visas.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EUMSs did not report any issues regarding the application of the EU Visa Code, including its recent changes [Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of 20 June 2019].

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EUMSs did not report any problems regarding the harmonization of documents and related practices.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No problems reported on application of Article 24 in the reporting period.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Based on information received from EUMSs/SACs, all practices are harmonized to the highest possible extent following the Visa Code provisions.

3.5 Exchange of information

Due to the COVID-19, concentration of consuls on the repatriation flights and a longer break in any visa services, statistics were not compiled regularly throughout the year until December 2020, when they were collected and distributed for the first three quarters of 2020. Due to the small numbers of visas issued in 2020, no profound discussion was dedicated (or demanded by MS) to this topic. More work on statistics is expected in 2021, when they will be exchanged regularly. A special appeal was made to the MS to closely follow this topic.

No cases of fraud were reported to the EU DEL or brought to a broad LSC forum, probably due to the very limited visa activity, extraordinary border controls and limited travel opportunity. Some individual exchanges may have taken place directly between some MS as the LSC (and LCC) allows also for such contacts.

TMIs have not been discussed much in the context of traveling impacted by the COVID pandemic. Despite the large number of cases of flight cancellations, boarding refusals, etc. – none of these cases have been related to the TMIs.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

During 2020 the LLC/LSC finished updating the Joint Consular Crisis Framework, directly incorporating lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis.

4. Challenges

For the next annual report, subjects to be addressed are:

- The lack of bilateral agreements on consular cooperation;
- Intensification of contacts with the Honorary Consul network of EUMSs/SACs not represented in the country;
- Visa expedition after the reopening of borders.
- Demand from local authorities to enter the visa waiver list of countries in the next revision by the Commission.

5. Other issues

No issues of a specific importance raised by the EUMS/SAC in the reporting period.



EUROPEAN UNION

EUROPEAN UNION DELEGATION
TO ECUADOR

Quito, 29 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN ECUADOR 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Six Member States of the Schengen Treaty maintain a presence in Ecuador (Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and Switzerland) and fourteen are represented by one of those countries: Austria (represented by Germany), Belgium (represented by France), Slovenia and Poland (represented by Switzerland), Estonia (represented by Italy), Slovakia (represented by Hungary), Finland, Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and the Czech Republic (represented by Spain). There are Spanish Consulates General in Quito and in Guayaquil. The Spanish Consulate General in Quito receives visa applications for Spain, the Netherlands, Finland and Lithuania from residents in its consular area only, and represents Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal and the Czech Republic for residents throughout Ecuador. The Spanish Consulate General in Guayaquil receives visa applications for Spain, the Netherlands, Finland and Lithuania from residents in its consular area only. During the period of temporary restrictions on travel to Europe due to COVID-19, the majority of the representation agreements were temporarily suspended on the initiative of the country represented or the government (with the exception of Estonia and Slovakia); some of them have already been reactivated (Portugal, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Malta)

2. LSC meetings that took place in 2020

In 2020 the COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on visa operations. From 16 March to 13 September 2020 a state of emergency was declared in Ecuador and various measures were introduced to manage the pandemic: periods of confinement, curfew, biosecurity measures, limitations on the size of gatherings and presence of staff in workplaces, restrictions on public and private transport, etc. The consulates and embassies had to adapt themselves to the biosecurity and gathering requirements, and work with a limited staff presence and with shift-based teleworking. From 16 March to 1 June commercial flights to Ecuador were suspended, and the country's sea and land borders are still temporarily closed. Due first of all to the suspension of all travel between Ecuador and Europe (apart from humanitarian and repatriation flights), and also due to temporary restrictions on non-essential flights to Europe (which are still in force), the consulates and embassies have been offering minimum visa services since March 2020, in accordance with the guidelines adopted by the Council of the EU and instructions from EU governments. During the period from March to June 2020, the consulates were extremely busy with the priority task of organising repatriation flights for citizens. LSC meetings were held in a virtual format due to COVID-19 restrictions. Exchange of information and coordination took place by email and in the WhatsApp group.

During 2020, two LSC meetings were held in Quito (22 June 2020, 11 November 2020), attended by all of the embassies/consulates with a presence (except for the Spanish Consulate General in

Guayaquil) and the representatives of the EU Delegation. The EU Delegation organised and chaired these meetings and was tasked with preparing the reports. Human-mobility related issues were systematically included in the meetings of Heads of Mission, which were held on a weekly basis at the height of the crisis. The issue of multiple-entry visa cascades was included on the agenda of the November meeting of HoMs.

3. Current situation

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The exchange of information and coordination among consuls in relation to the Visa Code and its application are satisfactory. The consuls have not highlighted any particular difficulties in the implementation of the revised rules of the Visa Code applicable since February 2020.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the list of supporting documents

The work of harmonising the list of supporting documents was completed in Ecuador with the adoption of the Commission Implementing Decision of 24 October 2018 establishing the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants for short-term visas in Bolivia, Ecuador, Pakistan and South Korea. The Member States confirm that the decision is being applied properly. The existing list has recently been updated and the Member States do not suggest that it should be modified in the short term.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules regarding the issuing of multiple-entry visas for applicants pursuant to Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('cascades')

The LSC group has begun the exchanges and has reflected on the issue of adapting the rules on 'cascades' to local conditions. The issue was dealt with at the November meeting of the LSC and at the HoMs meeting of the same month.

Until cascades that are adapted to local conditions have been adopted, the consulates and embassies are continuing to apply the general rules on the issuing of multiple-entry visas for applicants pursuant to Article 24(2) of the Visa Code.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

The LSC group discussed the issue of a coordinated opening of the entire visa service once the temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to Europe are lifted or if Ecuador were to be included in the list of countries whose residents should be exempt from the temporary restrictions. The LSC group agreed to organise the reopening in a coordinated manner.

It discussed the issue of measures on biosecurity and gatherings, applied by all of the consulates and embassies, with minimum standards.

3.5. Exchange of information

At LCS meetings the consuls of Member States exchanged information regarding:

- the compiling of quarterly statistics. It was agreed that the statistics should be compiled on a regular basis.

- the issuing of documents that justify the essential need to travel to Europe (with or without a visa), as called for by airlines, which may be issued by the consulates and embassies; the diverse practices of particular airlines.
- the implementation of guidelines on a minimum visa service during the period of restrictions on non-essential travel to Europe.
- migratory pressure from travellers who do not have due justification to travel to Europe during the period of temporary restrictions and the associated fraud.

3.6. Any other action taken at LSC meetings

N/A

4. Difficulties

The difficulties experienced within the visa service in 2020 were mainly related to particular circumstances concerning human mobility and the functioning of consulates and embassies in a pandemic situation.

5. Other business

The issue of the Schengen visa waiver for Ecuadorian citizens remains a high priority for Ecuador in its relations with the EU; this issue has been addressed in all high-level exchanges and political dialogue with the EU, and also with the Member States. In 2020, Ecuador fulfilled the pre-requisite of introducing biometric passports.

All of the embassies/consulates participating in Local Schengen Cooperation have approved this report.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO THE ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT

EU Coordination - Secretariat

31/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Egypt 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

In Egypt 26 Member States are present and 26 are represented in Cairo. Additionally, 8 Member States have consulates in Alexandria; 2 Member States have consulates in Hurghada; 2 Member States have consulates in Sharm El Sheikh; 1 Member State has a consulate in Port Said; 1 Member State has a consulate in Luxor and 1 Member State has a consulate in Suez.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The LSC group meets four times per year, in meetings chaired by the EU Delegation Deputy Head of Delegation. The EUDEL Political Section takes minutes, which are shared with MS locally and with Brussels. Usually, the EUDEL hosts the meetings in person back-to-back with meetings in the Local Consular Cooperation format to facilitate attendance for smaller embassies (noting of course that the members of the group do not completely overlap). In 2020 we continued to host meetings back-to-back, however meetings migrated online due to the outbreak of Covid-19. The group did not organise ad-hoc meetings in 2020, but plans to organise two ad-hoc meetings in 2021 (to give an additional opportunity to receive input to this report; and to discuss the harmonised list of supporting documents).

The Covid-19 crisis affected MS visa operations, when in March a majority of MS closed their visa sections as travel restrictions were put in place to the Schengen zone. External service providers also closed their facilities, or limited their services for this period. Over the summer, MS visa sections gradually reopened and by September, a number of MS had started issuing visas on special grounds, which continues to be the norm. While there was no harmonisation between Schengen States in their partial re-opening for visa services, MS used the LSC meetings to exchange information on their current visa operations. All embassies open for visa or consular activity have taken precautions, such as hygiene measures (disinfectant, masks, gloves), temperature checks, physical distance and pre-booked/limited time slots for visitors. While some MS would be able to return to normal visa operations within one week, others have mentioned requiring up to three to four weeks to re-open at full capacity.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The LSC group did not identify any problems with the application of the new Visa Code during 2020. Noting, however, that the application is difficult to assess due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of borders to Schengen, thus no MS has yet developed a practice of adopting the new code.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The latest version of the harmonised list of supporting documents in Egypt was agreed in 2012. During the LSC meeting in November 2020, the group agreed to work towards updating this list in 2021. To this end, the group proposed to set up a task force and hold a dedicated ad-hoc meeting in the LSC format on the topic. The main challenge to propose a new harmonised list remains the existence of different opinions on the Egyptian “Mogamma certificate” (showing, for the last seven years, passports, entry to and exit from Egypt, as well as travel destination, of Egyptian nationals). Some MS would prefer to remove it from the list, whereas others prefer keeping it. Additionally, some MS want to include the “Family Registration Document”. The Travel Health Insurance list also needs updating.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (‘MEV cascades’)

The group discussed a local adaptation of the cascade system in February 2020. Only a minority of MS were open for a discussion to make a local adaptation of the rules. A majority considered the MEV cascades positive. MS that advocated for adapting the rules have been welcomed to present their propositions and legal justifications for the adaptations, as requested per the new Visa Code. Since Covid-19, the discussion has been on hold.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

In the regular LSC meetings, MS compare practices and seek a common approach. MS noted, however, that the harmonisation of practices also depends on instructions from national headquarters. The group considered meetings organised respectively by the German, US and Canadian embassies on anti-fraud (documents, profiling) as positive. A member of the group asked if the EUDEL could facilitate meetings on similar topics, including also for local staff.

3.5. Exchange of information

The LSC group quarterly meetings have been the main forum for exchanges of information, during which experiences have been exchanged over cases of fraud (i.e. on HR-letters and bank statements), cooperation with local authorities and companies, external service providers, the functioning of VISMail, quarterly statistics and the travel medical insurance. For cases of fraud, additional meetings were organised by some MS embassies, and other like-minded embassies (DE, US, CAN). MS have expressed their appreciation for the open cooperation within the group. Below are a few areas highlighted in discussions this year and provided as input for this report.

Quarterly statistics: One MS has proposed sharing statistics, and receiving the statistics from other MS on a monthly basis instead of every quarter. Another MS has inquired if it is possible that this data is collected at headquarters level (i.e. it would be requested from MS capitals directly by the EEAS Consular Affairs Division in Brussels).

Cases of fraud: Many MS expressed that they experience problems to share information in a timely manner on cases of fraud. For example, a blacklist circulated by some MS cannot be consulted by others due to GDPR concerns. MS proposed to add an automatic alarm in the common SIS-system for cases of persons who have applied for a visa at another MS embassy with forged documents. MS also proposed to add a valid Schengen motivation for refusing a visa stating: “this person has

submitted fraudulent documents”, which would then be easier to discover if the applicant applies for a Schengen visa via other embassies. While it is possible to see an applicant’s previously refused applications on SIS, many MS wish to speed up the process of manually having to ask the competent embassy for the refusal reason.

Cooperation with local authorities and companies: In Egypt, a problem across the board is that banks do not give feedback to verify bank statements. Only colleagues with personal contacts in banks are able to verify bank statements.

Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring: This subject is regularly brought up in the LSC group and the exchanges are fruitful. In 2020, no joint monitoring exercise was conducted.

VISMail: Due to some technical problems, some MS reported difficulties in sending/receiving VISMail messages. In some cases, colleagues have resorted to regular mail for the exchanges. The technical problems hinder smooth communication via VISMail also for MS that do not themselves experience the technical issues (i.e. no replies received etc.).

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Not applicable.

4. Challenges

Ensuring a harmonised re-opening of MS visa sections after travel restrictions to the Schengen area are lifted after Covid-19 will be a challenge. This has, however, already been addressed in the group, and the EUDEL monitors how long it would take for MS visa sections to re-open at full capacity. The group will continue to discuss this during meetings in 2021. A potential challenge identified as related to the re-opening of visa sections and the new visa code concerns the required maximum of 15 days to process a visa. This could constitute a problem if Covid-19 continues to limit opening hours of external service providers, with limited office presence at national headquarters. These aspects would need to be considered when discussing how to ensure a harmonised re-opening of visa sections.

Updating the harmonised list of supporting documents will be a challenging discussion, given strong positions by different MS regarding some of the documents on (or not yet on) the list. The idea to set up a task force to come up with a new proposal for the list may help to bring forward arguments and justifications for the group to agree on an update.

5. Other issues

Not applicable.



EUROPEAN UNION
Delegation to Ethiopia

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN ETHIOPIA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. The Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa serves as a regional hub for the continent, with Ethiopian Airlines having daily connections to numerous African countries and several direct flights to Europe. The massive expansion of the Addis Ababa airport over the past years has increased the number of transit passengers travelling to Europe.

21 EU Member States, as well Norway and Switzerland, are present in Ethiopia. In total, 20 Member countries of the Schengen-area have a representation in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, with 6 of them making use of visa outsourcing services to receive Schengen visa applications (1 country had foreseen to start using visa outsourcing services starting from 2020, but the roll-out was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Since November 2017, a prior consultation procedure for Schengen visa is in place for Ethiopia.

Ethiopia recorded just over 120,000 COVID-19 infections during 2020, leading to around 1,900 deaths. While testing of the general population was limited, it seems fair to say that the spread of COVID-19 in Ethiopia was less quick than in Europe. Since April 2018, Ethiopia is also in political transition with many political and economic reforms, but also rising ethnic conflicts and political instability. These political and ethnic tensions led to several episodes of violence in different parts of the country during 2020, often accompanied by communication and internet blackouts. Since November 2020, a major military conflict has erupted in the Northern Tigray Region, with far-reaching political, security and humanitarian consequences.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The year 2020 was atypical in terms of Schengen visa as the number of applications received in Ethiopia was drastically lower than during previous years because of the global COVID-19 pandemic (most Schengen countries reported a drop of more than 75% in the number of applications received). Already during the 1st quarter, the number of applications received was significantly lower than during the same period in 2018 or 2019. After COVID-19 related travel restrictions to Europe were introduced during the month of March, the number of applications dropped to very low numbers during the 2nd quarter, 3rd quarter and 4th quarter of the year. For the biggest part of 2020, only essential travel between Europe and the Schengen area was allowed, which mostly limited visa applications to those received from officials and diplomats, immediate family members of EU-citizens, students and urgent applications on medical or humanitarian grounds.

The LSC Group in Ethiopia met 9 times during 2020, keeping to its regular schedule of having a meeting every six weeks. From April until November 2020, the meetings took place virtually in a WEBEX-format. The meetings of the LSC-group in Addis Ababa are usually organized back-to-

back with the meeting of the EU Consular Group in Ethiopia. All LSC-meetings were chaired by the EU Delegation to Ethiopia and well attended (15 – 20 participants for each of the meetings).

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

At the start of 2020, the members of the LSC Group had a common training on the new Visa Code. During the LSC meetings in January and February 2020, Embassies discussed at length about the new Schengen Visa Code and its practical implementation in the context of Ethiopia. Embassies mentioned several concerns, in particular with regard to the Multi-Entry Visa cascades (see paragraph 3.3). During the remainder of the year, the number of visa applications was so low that no significant challenges with regard to the application of the new Schengen visa code could be recorded.

3.2. Implementation of Harmonised List of Supporting Documents

The Harmonised List of Supporting Documents for Ethiopia was adopted in August 2017. The LSC meetings regularly share experiences on the implementation of the Harmonised List. No specific challenges were reported in this regard.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The Schengen countries represented in Addis Ababa felt that the political and economic situation of Ethiopia, which is very volatile and can change from one day to the next, does not allow for the generalized application of the "MEV cascade system" foreseen in the new Visa Code, which is seen as being too generous towards the applicants and potentially causing increased risk for asylum claims by the applicants. The recent military conflict in Tigray is a perfect illustration in this regard: politicians or officials which held high Government positions until only a few months ago are now fugitives hunted down by the Ethiopian Federal Police with their bank accounts frozen and assets confiscated.

After consultation with the LSC group, it was decided in February 2020 to develop a proposal for adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas specifically for applicants in Ethiopia. The proposal would differentiate between two categories of applicants:

- AU officials, UN officials, Researchers from Universities and official research Institutes, Religious leaders: for these categories the MEV cascade system foreseen in the new visa code would apply, but the maximum validity of the multi-entry visa would be limited to a duration of three years in stead of five years.
- All other categories of applicants would be limited to receiving multi-entry visa with a maximum validity of one year.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proposal for a locally adapted MEV-cascade system for Ethiopia was never finalized nor submitted to Brussels. The problem became also much less relevant during the second half of 2020, because of the extremely low number of visa applications. It is expected however that the issue of the MEV-Cascade system will come back on the foreground as soon as the number of applications for Schengen visa in Ethiopia starts picking up again.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

During the month of August, the LSC Group facilitated a discussion with the Ethiopian Athletics Federation on the policies of different European countries with regard to considering professional athletes as “essential travellers” during the COVID-19 pandemic. As it could be observed during the discussion, it proved difficult to find a common approach among Schengen-countries with regard to travel of professional athletes during the pandemic.

3.5. Exchange of information

During the LSC meetings, the EU embassies regularly share information about the number of visa applications, trends observed in the applications and the main challenges faced by the visa sections. During 2020, there were additional exchanges and coordination with regard to the closure of visa sections because of the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions to Europe. In addition to the LSC meetings, there is also a dedicated What’s App group where Schengen-related matters can be discussed.

In Addis Ababa, there is also an active Fraud Working Group that brings together also non-Schengen countries and where practical cases of detected fraud are discussed (the Fraud Working Group did not meet regularly in 2020, because there were hardly any cases of fraud to report on because of the overall very low number of visa applications).

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

On the occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LSC group took the initiative to streamline communication on travel restrictions decided in Europe towards the Ethiopian authorities and towards Ethiopian Airlines. Especially from the side of Ethiopian Airlines (most directly affected by the travel restrictions) the common communications from the LSC Group with regard to travel restrictions and their implementation were very appreciated.

4. Challenges

The main challenges with regard to Schengen visa and the application of the Visa Code that were observed during the past years include the following points:

- 1) Some applicants found it difficult to understand the distinction between “essential travel” and “non-essential travel” that was introduced because of the COVID-19 related travel restrictions. This resulted in a relative high number of refusals (on a very low number of applications) during the second half of the year;
- 2) A relative high number of numerous overstaying and asylum cases was reported (considering the very low number of applications). This could be related to the many political and ethnic conflicts that Ethiopia experienced during 2020, in particular the Tigray conflict towards the end of the year;
- 3) Dialogue, communication and technical cooperation with Ethiopian administration, especially the Immigration, Nationality and Vital Events Agency, remains very challenging. The Immigration Agency was closed for many months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was little or no communication possible and it was difficult to obtain written confirmation of exceptional immigration measures that had been introduced;

- 4) Ethiopian authorities were found to be rather generous in handing out Diplomatic and Service passports, also providing them to religious leaders or to people working for organizations not directly linked to the government. Holders of Diplomatic and Service passports tend to insist on visa fees being waived and processing times being as short as possible, even if their travels are clearly not related to any official mission on behalf of the Government.

5. Other issues

This annual report was discussed in the LSC meeting on January 21st, 2021 and approved by Member States.



31 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Georgia 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

17 Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden) are present in Georgia and 10 Member States (Belgium, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia) are represented from abroad.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to COVID-19 crisis and various travelling restrictions imposed by both Member States and Georgia, meetings had to be limited and visa operations were reduced to the minimum. In the second part of 2020, Member States begun issuing mostly long-term visas. One LSC meeting was held before the pandemic. Further coordination of LSC was conducted via emails and “WhatsApp” group. Representatives of the Members States outside of the capital were also included in this group to ensure relevant coordination and up-to-date information exchange. Given that the pandemic situation and restrictions changed quickly, this form of communication proved to be more successful than communication via emails. EUD continued to collect information provided by the Member States and inform about relevant updates from the EU side.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

If the epidemiologic situation would allow, Member States and the EUD would be ready to fully implement the Visa Code.

Member States noted the particular provisions related to the implementation of the articles 6 and 7 of the Visa Code, which are influenced by the specifics of the Georgian migration policy. Before the restrictions related to pandemics came into force, a significant number of countries was listed in the category, determining the countries whose nationals do not need a visa to enter Georgia and who can stay (work and study) in Georgia up to one year. Thus, in practice, if a third country national does not have a resident permit and is legally staying in the country based on his visa-free days in Georgia, the term ‘legally residing’ is subject to interpretation on how to determine whether the applicant is legally residing in Georgia (and what kind of documents could prove this case). Though para 2 of Article 6 allows to accept an application of a person who is legally present, but not legally residing in the country, it requires a justification, therefore, it should be used more like an exception. A working contract, the entry and exit stamps in the passport, company papers were listed as possible means of guidance in these cases.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The implementation of the COM Decision on the list of supporting documents was assessed as good and none of the Member States at this stage has expressed a need to amend the existing list of supporting documents.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Due to COVID-19 crisis and the very limited number of Schengen visas issued, Member States agreed that at this stage it is difficult to evaluate the practical implementation of the revised general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24 (d).

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

No other initiatives have been taken in 2020.

3.5. Exchange of information

Member States have no reports about particular irregularities in cooperation with local authorities, companies, or any particular cases of fraud.

Exchange of information is conducted mostly via emails so that the communication would be more efficient.

Member States emphasised the need to be able to see in the Visa Information System not only applications of Schengen visas, but also National visas and Resident permits issued by other Member States. This would undoubtedly contribute to tackling security and migration related challenges more efficiently. Member States emphasized the need for these amendments (currently under preparation) to enter into force as soon as possible.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

No other initiative has been taken in LSC during 2020.

4. Challenges

Main challenges for LSC in 2021 will continue to be following closely the COVID-19 related travel restrictions, timely exchange of information and mutual updates. Member States will agree on restarting fully accepting Schengen visa applications if or when the circumstances allow.

5. Other issues

Law of Georgia “On the Rules of Leaving and Entering Georgia by the Citizens of Georgia” entered into force 1 Jan 2021. This law has been adopted as a measure to safeguard the Schengen visa-free regime with Georgia, introducing pre-departure checks of Georgian citizens travelling to the EU/Schengen countries. For a smooth operation of pre-departure checks and for possible legal proof to be used in case of an appeals procedure, Georgian authorities would need to have written information about Georgian citizens that have been returned from or banned entry into the EU/Schengen country. As Georgia does not have access to the SIS, this kind of information is currently not available to Georgian authorities. A specific mechanism of exchange of information among Schengen countries and Georgia would be necessary for an efficient implementation of this new law.

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Ghana 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Nine (9) Member States are present and 15 are represented by residing MS in Accra.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Three physical LSC meetings were held in 2020. The meetings were well attended by all Member States. Meetings were chaired by the EUDEL and hosted by, EU, Hungary and France. The reports of the meetings were drawn up by EUDEL.

During the pandemic, virtual meetings were held. **There was excellent cooperation on coordinating repatriation flights organised by MS during the COVID pandemic.** It was a novelty to everybody and we had to improvise. In the initial phase, the Netherlands organised two consular flights with around 375 people on board on each (a mix of Dutch passengers and EU nationals). Germany, the Nordics and Belgium organized one repatriation flight each. Especially the latter is worth mentioning, as Belgium does not have diplomatic presence in Ghana. Cooperation with their Embassy in Abidjan and EU DEL here was exemplary. The Netherlands / KLM continued with weekly flights from end of June until the beginning of September: KLM coming in with a cargo flight and repatriating Dutch + EU nationals back to Europe. In total it came to about 3,000 EU citizens. Around 700 French citizens and foreign citizens resident in France repatriated on 20 flights from April to August. Norway initiated a flight 9 April which brought about 175 EU/EEA citizens and residence permit holders from Ghana and Nigeria to Denmark and Norway. Italy repatriated 604 passengers, 366 of which were citizens from EU and Schengen area countries, on two special flights in May and July.

Until today (17 December), **Ghana's land border remain closed. The Accra international Airport was opened on 1 September 2020.** Most MS are back to issuing national visas, MS issue Schengen visas only on specific cases.

There are no LSC outside of Accra. MS issue visas in Accra for residents of neighbouring countries (SLE, LIB, Togo among others). Exchange also with regard to applicants and documents from these countries.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS are well equipped, rapid exchange between MS possible through up to date contact list. Some MS still have no external service provider but deadlines can be met.

No significant challenges relating to the implementation of the Visa Code.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Harmonised list of supporting documents is in place since 2019. Currently no need to update or amend the existing list.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS try to make generous use of these rules, also to reduce their administrative expense.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Last year three workshops were organized: by German Document and Visa Advisor, the Ghana Births and Deaths registry and the Dutch LOC in order to ensure harmonisation of practices.

3.5. Exchange of information

Quarterly statistics: Good exchange, statistics are summarised at the German Embassy and shared quarterly with other missions (practise currently suspended due to COVID). Trend before COVID: Significant rise of applications for almost all MS.

Cases of fraud: Fraudulent student transcripts and efforts to get scholarships on false basis. Fraudulent birth certificates and bank statements. Fraud detected in applications which qualify for (national) exemptions of the EU (COVID) travel ban. Forged entry or exit stamps of African countries often discovered in applications. Several forged copies of genuine Schengen visas issued by French missions in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Frequent fraudulent employment statements, letters, payslips, job offers and work permits. Some MS lack competence to detect fraudulent passports and birth/marriage certificates.

Travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI): A list of credible travel medical insurance companies for Schengen compiled by Norway.

Any problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules: No problems.

Cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies): Good cooperation with GIS (especially DFEC) and Births and Deaths Registry. Bank statements can be checked via email at almost every bank, however some of these banks are not always reactive. Airlines partially reluctant to carry passengers with valid visas because of insecurity with regard to entry ban regulations. Some MS issue a declaration specifying why the passenger is allowed to travel.

Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises): Germany, Hungary: No external service provider is used, not planned for the near future. Some MS cooperate with law firms to verify documents. Verification fee has to be paid by applicants.

Use of VISMail and the Visa Information System: Not used by all MS, some technical problems. Germany, Hungary and the Czech Republic are using VISMail.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

4. Challenges

Requests for excessive numbers of visas for Ghanaian diplomatic missions to Europe. Growing impatience with regard to entry ban. Possible “visa run”, once entry ban is lifted.

5. Other issues



LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Hong Kong and Macao 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

15 Member States are present and 15 are represented in Hong Kong.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

7 meetings were held in 2020, including an extraordinary meeting on 6 February regarding the coronavirus outbreak. The meetings were well attended. The EU Office prepared reports of the meetings. It was not necessary to hold meetings online.

The Covid-19 crisis had a major impact on Member States' visa operations with most visa services being suspended or significantly curtailed. The cessation or limitation of visa operations was not put in place in a coordinated way, raising some concerns over the lack of a consistent approach. A coordinated approach to the resumption of visa processing was encouraged in the LSC – however, a resumption of more normal services has not occurred yet due to the continuing outbreak.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The implementation of the Visa Code was discussed at the LSC meetings on 13 January and 11 March.

In January the EU Office updated LSC on latest developments, including the preparation of the two handbooks. It was agreed to re-circulate the harmonised list of attachments for visa applications pour memoire – MS wished to retain the present list as it stands. MS also raised the issue of continuity of conditions for the issuance of multi-year visas.

In March, there was consideration of the new visa rules that entered into force on 2nd February with a principal aim being the harmonisation of practices. One area identified for particular attention was the introduction of a harmonised approach to the issuance of multiple-entry visas for regular travellers of good standing who fulfilled certain criteria.

EU MS reported no particular challenges with the new provisions and were not minded to propose local adaptation. However, it was noted that the much lower level of visa applications due to the virus made it difficult to make a full assessment at this stage.

It was agreed that the EUO would make quarterly compilations of visa statistics based on MS input, beginning with the 2nd quarter 2020. Given the continuing lack of visa activity, it was agreed later to postpone the commencement of the compilation of statistics until 2021.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

As noted above, MS are satisfied with the list of harmonised documents as it stands.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

N/A

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

3.5. Exchange of information

- *quarterly statistics;*

See above

- *cases of fraud;*

Visa fraud is not perceived as a major problem.

- *travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI);*

N/A

- *any problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules;*

N/A

- *cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)*

N/A

- *cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises);*

N/A

- *use of VISMail and the Visa Information System;*

All EU MS now have access to VISMail

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

4. Challenges

It was agreed by the LSC that “visa shopping” by domestic workers accompanying their European families to Europe - ostensibly for holidays - should be addressed further by the LSC group in 2021. The issue raised concerns about compliance with labour laws in Europe, which varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Several MS shared their approach to such visas during the December LSC meeting, with several allowing only short periods for visits to Europe

5. Other issues

N/A



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO INDIA

11/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in India 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

25 Schengen Member States (SMS) are present and one (LI, represented by CH) is represented in New Delhi, India. The four prospective SMSs (BG, CY, HR, RO) also have a consular presence and issue visas in New Delhi. In addition, a number of SMSs have additional consulates processing Schengen visas: Mumbai (BE, DE, ES, FR, HU, IT, PL), Kolkata (DE, FR, IT), Bangalore (DE, FR), Chennai (DE), Pondicherry (FR) and Goa (PT).

All SMSs outsource non-judgemental tasks to an external service provider (ESP). With the exception of ES, they all use the same ESP, which has 16 visa application centres (VACs). Each Member State selects in which VAC they wish to be represented: 14 MS are represented in 12 or more of these VACs. ES is represented in the 10 VACs of the other ESP. Three prospective SMSs also avail of the service of an ESP (only RO is not using any).

Many consular sections of SMS in India also have the jurisdiction to process Schengen visa requests of applicants from neighbouring countries (NP, BT, LK, MV, BD, AF, MY, MM, SG).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Short description of impact of the COVID-19 crisis' impact on Member States' visa operations and on the coordination of LSC.

Two formal LSC meetings have been held at the EU Delegation in New Delhi in January and February 2020, followed by 8 virtual meetings, gathering SMSs and prospective SMSs. On average, 19 States were present at each meeting and only one prospective SMS was never represented during the year (the same one as in previous report). The meetings are chaired by the EUD, who also drafts and shares their minutes. In March 2020, EUDEL organised a LSC meeting in Mumbai, attended by all the local representations.

Representatives of the main ESP were invited to one LSC meeting to discuss fair access to their services. In two occasions, LSC meetings were organised back-to-back with local migration group meetings, where IE was invited, as well as representatives from the International Labour Organisation and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, giving talks on their activities within the project supporting the EU-India Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility.

In addition to representatives from visa sections, also airports or immigration liaison officers (ALOs/ILOs) of the Schengen MSs attended the meetings (DE has two ILOs in Delhi and two in Mumbai; CH and AT have one immigration liaison officer in Delhi; FI and NL have an ILO located

abroad (Helsinki and Bangkok respectively), who also cover India). DE had an ALO in Chennai, and NO had an ALO in Delhi: both have left and have not been replaced.

The Covid-19 crisis hit India in March, with a severe lock-down and cancellation of all international flights. ESPs stopped their operations, and many visa sections suspended all visa operations for several months.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The application Article 48 of the Visa Code is done through three channels: regular meetings, access and sharing of information through the platform AGORA and training sessions organised for visa officers (see point 3.5). An annual meeting, with visit of visa sections of volunteer Member States, was planned in March but cancelled because of the Covid-19 crisis.

The problems related to the application of the Visa Code discussed in 2020 related to:

- Practical elements (new visa application turn out to be much less practical).
- Interpretation of article 24(2) (see below).
- Determination of the main destination: the discussion showed variation of interpretations among MS for such determination and therefore acceptance of visa applications. The LSC eventually agreed that in unclear cases, the number of nights would determine the main destination and in case of equal numbers, the State with the first longest stay would issue the visa.
- Communication between SMS and use of VISMAIL (see below).
- Revision of the common information sheet (Article 47(1)) and communication on the new Visa Code.
- Update on Travel Medical Insurance.
- Exchanges on the operations of the ESP.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The revision of the harmonised list of supporting documents in India was finalised and adopted on 27 May 2020. Considering the very limited number of visas issued since, there has been no monitoring of its implementation after this date.

The LSC also participated in the revision of the harmonisation of the list of supporting documents for Nepal, as many visa sections in New Delhi are also in charge of visa applications from this country. Deliberations were shared with the LSC Kathmandu, with particular comments on the lists of documents in case of travel of minors (and documents needed in case of sole guardianship).

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The MEV cascade introduced in 2020 was seen by the LSC as an opportunity to improve the harmonisation of approaches to MEV. A survey early 2020 confirmed that the SMSs had quite divergent approaches, which for some of them were decided at central level.

The LSC had started to discuss the application of the multiple-entry visas cascade, sharing interpretations and first questions. One MS circulated their guidelines for application for discussion.

The LSC had decided that all sections would keep a record of issues of applications identified, in view of creating a working group to iron out these issues. This work was halted by the Covid-19 crisis and will need to resume in 2021.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

The LSC has proposed a harmonisation of control of ESPs, adopting a common inspection checklist, and promoting a tool to exchange information regarding effective inspections of visa application centres.

The LSC has also initiated harmonisation of the format of the new application form, which is less practical than the previous form. One member shared the format they developed, enabling all information to fit on a couple of pages.

In the second part of the year, LSC discussed structural and operational measures introduced to mitigate the sanitary risk, as well as resumption of operations for essential travellers (going beyond the Schengen visas). As decisions on these are not (only) taken at local level, it served more as information exchange than as harmonisation purpose.

3.5. Exchange of information

The common template for reporting quarterly statistics was shared with all SMSs at the beginning of the year. All visa sections are invited to share their quarterly statistics on the AGORA platform. The template was adapted so that all consulates issuing visas could report their own statistics and also to allow SMSs to report their statistics regarding long-term visas.

The trends observed were discussed after the first and third trimester (after the second semester, the discussion was about the resumption of visa operations). The observation is hampered by the partial completion of the obligation of the visa sections. In November 2020, 10 of the 40 visa sections in India had shared no information, and 10 more had only shared information for the first quarter.

The statistics shared showed an almost complete halt of visas being issued in the second quarter, and a very progressive return to visas issued in the third quarter only for few visa sections (10% of what was issued in the first quarter for three visa sections).

The list of companies issuing travel medical insurances was updated following the Covid-19 crisis, keeping those confirming that they covered the medical expenses incurred by this disease. Cooperation with the General Insurance Council, updating its website where visa sections can verify the authenticity of contracts submitted by applicants, remained effective.

Cooperation with the ESP was focused at the beginning of 2020 on their organisation to ensure that they could deliver their service effectively without applicants having the need to subscribe to the additional services they provide, in the wake of increasing demand. This was of course halted following the Covid-19 crisis. From the second half of 2020 LSC exchanged information about conditions for re-opening of the ESP offices and received a request from the ESP for increase of fees of essential or additional services.

At the beginning of 2020, the EUDEL organised a survey on the use of VISMail. Some visa sections reported a lack of training or guidelines, making it difficult to use it. As officers access it through a national adaptation, local training at LSC level could not address this shortcoming. The system is therefore not optimal for communication between SMS and many prefer to use alternative means. The recurring question on protection of private data versus crime detection remains an unsolved matter.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

In February 2020, the LSC organised a series of training sessions for visa officers of SMS in New Delhi. 63 officers participated to a ½-day training course organised by ILOs/ALOs, with theoretical and practical training about verification of travel documents, visas and accompanying documents. The corpus of presentations is then shared on the AGORA website.

A survey was also performed in February 2020, regarding the organisation of the visa sections and approaches of multi-entry visas. All but one SMS participated and showed that 70 permanent expats (+20 on temporary basis) were working on visas in New Delhi, with 140 permanent local staff (and 40 additional on temporary basis). Information from other locations was scant. The survey also revealed the extent of coverage of neighbouring countries by many SMSs for processing Schengen visa applications: Nepal (14), Bhutan (13), Sri Lanka (10), Bangladesh (9), the Maldives (9) and Afghanistan (3).

4. Challenges

Response to challenges listed in the 2018-2019 report:

The LSC addressed the operational challenges, by updating common documents on time and reviewing possible harmonisation of practices. However, some challenges remain impossible to solve at LSC level, such as the effective use of VISMAIL across all visas sections; to make it a consistent, effective and practical tool of exchange of information.

Subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021):

The subjects that the LSC expects to address during the next reporting period are:

- Harmonisation of application of the cascade under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code.
- Relations with other LSC for countries dealing with visa applications of neighbouring countries.
- Resumption of activities of ESPs: maintenance of operations, controls, etc.
- Exchange of information on migration and security risks: from practical exchange of individual cases to cooperation with local enforcement authorities to collection of information in view of application of Article 24 (2b) of the Visa code.

LSC TEHRAN – annual report 2020

2020 has not been an easy year for MS Consulates in Tehran. Beginning with protests over the death of Qasem Soleimani and the shooting down of commercial airline flight PS752 with 10 European (SWE) citizens, three individuals traveling on GER issued travel documents and 63 CAN citizens in ITA consular care on board, Iran then found itself, at the end of February, among the first countries to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic including a near total disruption of international flights to/from Tehran in the wake of the aforementioned plane crash and the Corona outbreak. The latter forced consulates and visa sections to close or severely restrict customer access; the following EU entry restrictions brought visa operations to a complete stop.

In consequence, the six LSC/LCC meetings (24 February, 2 March, 14 June, 06 August, 1 October, 26 November) focused heavily on crisis management, repatriation possibilities for stranded citizens, travel advice, briefings from the local WHO representative on the pandemic situation in Iran, and the management of consulates and visa sections with regard to customer and staff protection from COVID-19 infections as well as visa operations under EU entry restrictions. The challenges born of this are ongoing for MS Consulates. Commission Guidance and communication templates were shared with MS.

The entry into force of the new Visa Code on 2 February 2020 was another big event leading to intensified exchanges between MS on a number of issues. Sanctions continue to pose issues for ESP operations.

Overall, cooperation and coordination between LSC MS has been intense, productive and supportive throughout the year with numerous exchanges, within as well as outside of regular meetings under the two Presidencies, with all MS regularly sending coordination questions, updates and useful information for all.

Main LSC issues covered

1. COVID - 19: Partial and Gradual Lifting of Travel Restrictions to the EU & a Phased Resumption of Visa Operations

Discussions on these issues have continued throughout the year since the first Commission questionnaire. These first conclusions still hold true as Iran will continue to be a risk country, potentially even after a vaccination campaign will have started, as the potential impact of sanctions remains unclear: although Iran did sign up to the COVAX Initiative, money transfers and

distribution to the whole population are likely to prove problematic. Awareness of social distancing and other prevention measures remains low, therefore, the risks associated with customer service and staff presence have not eased. Travel restrictions decided by the Iranian government on short notice complicate the upholding of appointment schedules leading to extra work for catching up missed appointments.

Pressures deriving from the political and economic situation of the country remain a significant migratory risk factor, posing additional challenges to MS visa sections in Tehran. The well organised prospective applicants with large support networks in a number of MS add pressure on visa sections with multiple campaigns to speed up the issuing of national visas.

A full lifting of entry restrictions for holders of Schengen visas on short notice under currently necessary restrictions on the work and customer environment (limited staff, rotation system of staff to prevent spread of infection, lack of IT system connections for (local) staff in home office settings, social distancing in waiting rooms, limited exposure to customers etc.) would severely overstretch MS capacities and lead to a massive build-up of waiting times beyond the limits set by the visa code.

Successfully restarting full Schengen visa operations would require a phasing-in approach allowing for some time to reorganise staffing levels and procedures, especially if it were to happen before the pandemic being fully under control in Iran.

2. The New Visa Code – LSC Decisions on Implementation

(Please refer to the HRV Presidency paper on the revised visa code for more detail.)

Discussions among member states showed a fairly uniform approach to issues raised by the new visa code.

There was agreement as to not using Farsi language forms in order not to complicate visa procedures (Art. 11 VC), the use of the harmonised list of supporting documents (Art. 14 VC), though the difficulty to assess the veracity of proof of accommodation and return trip in the age of internet travel portals allowing for free cancelation of bookings was noted by MS.

MS recommended the question of higher visa fees (Art. 16 VC) be discussed among EU MS capitals with regard to the lack of Iranian cooperation on readmission and other relevant issues.

The majority of MS was clearly in favour of a stricter application of the cascade system (Art. 24 VC) as the volatile economic and political situation in the country was calling into doubt the possibility of Iranian applicants proving their integrity and reliability, their economic situation in Iran and their genuine intention to leave the territory of the MS before the expiry of any MEV with a validity longer than two years. This assessment also takes into account the so-called “nest builders phenomenon” where well-to do Iranians travelled correctly for several times, transferring money and preparing “their nest”, before finally “jumping ship” with the whole family. MS therefore agreed not to extend the cascade mechanism beyond Art. 24 II b) VC, i.e. not beyond MEV with a validity of 2 years. In any case, the issuing of five year MEV for Iranian applicants is not possible due to the five year validity of Iranian passports.

3. VIS-Mail Use

Another discussion point was the use of VIS-Mail for document requests and exchanges on applicants. While nearly all Schengen MS use VIS-Mail, almost all were experiencing IT troubles, partly due to the notoriously bad connectivity in Iran, making it very impractical and frustrating to use. The language barrier between MS local authorities and third countries led to some issues of understanding regarding requests.

News on VIS-Mail being fully integrated into VIS in a couple of years and thus centralized, making it more user-friendly, was therefore well received among MS.

Conclusions

MS consulates in Iran continue to work under a number of pressures, intensified through the COVID-19 crisis. However, exchanges between MS flourish and generally lead to a broad consensus on all matters visa operations. 2020 Presidencies HRV and GER stand ready to support the upcoming PRT Presidency in Iran.



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO IRAQ
EU LIAISON OFFICE ERBIL

Erbil, 31 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ERBIL, Kurdistan Region of IRAQ 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

10 Member States were present in Erbil in 2020, as Consulate Generals⁶, Consulates⁷, or as branches of their Embassy in Baghdad⁸. Other Member States follow KRI matters from other capitals (Baghdad⁹ and also Abu Dhabi¹⁰, Amman¹¹, Ankara¹² and Beirut¹³, or from their own capital¹⁴).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The COVID-19 crisis had a major impact on the functioning of all MS's consulate offices in Erbil. Most of them stopped their operations for several months. Some remained open but scaled down their activities.

This state of play impacted the number of LSC meetings. 3 were held in 2020, on 12/1, 10/5 and 18/6, the first one face-to-face and the two others remotely. They were mildly to well-attended. In agreement with MS dating back to 2019 and at their request, the Head of EU Office Erbil chaired the meetings.

COVID restrictions did not allow the organization of *ad hoc* meetings with speakers, nor field visits.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS felt that they were well prepared and briefed on the visa code by their capital or by their colleagues in Brussels, including on the revised rules applicable since February 2020. There were no specific issue raised during these meetings.

⁶ CZ, DE, EL, FR, HU, NL & PL

⁷ IT & RO

⁸ BG

⁹ ES, FI, HR & SE

¹⁰ PT

¹¹ AT, BE, CY & IE

¹² LV & SI

¹³ SK

¹⁴ DK, EE, LU, LT & MT

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In Erbil, we did discuss the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents in the course of LSC meetings, in the wake of an increase of fake documents provided by visa applicants. Work is still on-going.

We did not think that there might have been a need to amend the existing list. The problem was about forged documents *per se*.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

N/A in Erbil.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Considering the low number of consulates issuing visas in Erbil, in case of need the ones concerned cooperate with each other.

3.5. Exchange of information

Exchange of information within the LSC tackled:

- cases of fraud;
- travel medical insurance (TMI);
- problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules;
- cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies);
- cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises);
- use of VISMail and the Visa Information System.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A.

4. Challenges

N/A.

5. Other issues

N/A.



EUROPEAN UNION

Delegation to the State of Israel

05/02/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Israel 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

LSC Tel Aviv covers the area of the State of Israel as internationally recognised. Visas are issued by Member States (MS) in the Consular Sections of their embassies in Tel Aviv. IS and LU have no representation of their own in this jurisdiction. IS is thus represented by DK and LU is represented by BE. Some EU Member States also cover the area of the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip from the Consular Sections of their embassies in Tel Aviv (FI, CZ, PL, SK, EE, LV and LT). Israeli citizens, holders of ordinary passports, are not required to be in possession of a visa when entering the Schengen area for less than 90 days¹⁵. LSC Tel Aviv therefore essentially covers the cases of non-Israeli citizens who are residents in Israel. Nationals from the occupied Palestinian territory are subjected to visa requirements.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, issues relating to consular matters and the COVID-19 crisis were discussed during ad-hoc meetings at all levels, HoMs, DCMs, consular throughout 2020. LSC MS have daily exchanges in a dedicated WhatsApp group. An online joint LSC/LCC meeting was held in October 2020, which was well-attended. The meeting was chaired jointly by the EU Delegation and the German Presidency.

Most LSC MS continue to deal with visa applications only for emergency/limited cases.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

MS are already applying the rules of the Revised Visa code and revised rules since February 2020. No specific problems have been encountered.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Harmonized List of Supporting Documents for Israel has been concluded. It has been officially approved by the Visa Committee. MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired and that the current list remains valid.

¹⁵ Due to COVID-related restrictions introduced by the European, MS and Israeli authorities, travel to/from Israel has been subject to a number of additional measures and restrictions since March 2020.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS have generally adapted to the general rules on multiple-entry visas under Article 24 (2), although most visa operations have been limited to emergency/limited cases during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

MSs has already decided to harmonize the exemptions from Article 16 and do not charge fees from holders of diplomatic passports applying for visas, minors aged 6 to 12 years will be charged equivalent of 35 euros.

3.5. Exchange of information

MS and the EU Delegation have solid exchange of information and engage with Israeli interlocutors on regular basis, in 2020 mainly with the MFA Head of Protocol and the Ministry of Health. At the end of 2019, the LSC/LCC group held an exchange of view with Israeli authorities regarding cases of fraud.

Regarding travel medical insurance (TMI), all MSs in Tel Aviv recognize TMIs issued by local Israeli companies for the purpose of visa applications.

The VISMail system is fully used by MS present.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Initiatives in the LSC have throughout 2020 been chiefly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal coordination with LSC member states took place during the months of March-May 2020 to exchange information on available commercial flights options for citizens who wanted to return to the Schengen area. The EU Civil Protection Mechanism was not activated for Israel.

No other initiatives to report.

4. Challenges

Challenges to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021) will mainly relate to resumption of visa operations and other efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Other issues

AoB: Estonia has postponed cooperation with VFS in Israel until Feb 22, 2021.

No other issues are reported from LSC Tel Aviv.

The report has been approved by all MSs present in Tel Aviv.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN JORDAN 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

14 Schengen Member States have consulates in Amman and issue visas (AT, BE, CZ, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, NL, NO, PL, ES, SE, CH). There are several non-represented countries (EE, DK, FI, IS, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, PT, SI, SK) that are represented by another Schengen country as follows: AT represents SI and SK; BE represents LU; CH represents LI; DE represents LT and LV, ES represents PT; IT represents MT; NL represents EE; NO represents DK, FI and IS. Those countries which are not represented in Amman have their nearest consulates in Cairo (MT, LV, LT, PT, SI), Ankara (EE, FI), Beirut (SK, DK) and London (IS).

As a consequence of the Syrian crisis and the withdrawal of many diplomatic missions from Damascus, many Schengen countries' embassies in Amman are authorised to receive applications from Syrian nationals. Some countries have no restrictions on where Syrians should apply (FR), whereas others have authorised Beirut and Amman to receive the applications (PL, NL, IT, CH, BE, HU, CZ, EL), with the majority being processed in Beirut. AT receives visa applications from Syrians in Beirut; DE in Ankara, Beirut and Amman. ES does not receive visa applications in Amman from Syrians who are not residents in Jordan; all Syrian citizens can apply at the ES Embassy in Beirut. FR also issues Asylum visas only for Iraqi and Syrian residents in Jordan.

There are several MS that are not represented in Iraq or do not issue Schengen visas at their Embassies there, and in some cases issue visas for Iraqi nationals at their Embassies in Amman (BE, AT, CH, NO).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two LSC meetings were held in the reporting period (June and October 2020). An LSC meeting was planned for March 2020 but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Throughout the reporting period, EUDEL hosted and chaired the LSC meetings and drew up summary reports. The reports were shared with MS, some of which also share the reports with their capitals.

The regular anti-fraud meetings, linked to consular coordination, were also suspended during the reporting period.

From March to May 2020, visa issuance came to a complete halt due to the travel restrictions in Europe and the closure of the airports in Jordan. The issuance of Schengen visas restarted on a very small scale in comparison to pre-COVID times when Queen Alia International Airport in Amman reopened on 8 September 2020.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The MS are well equipped to apply the Visa Code and share information on different kinds of visa matters. MS exchange information with each other on a regular basis and when needed, for example on refusals. The revised rules applicable since February 2020 were discussed through e-mail exchanges. A few issues were still raised with regard to the implementation of the new Visa Code, for example on the fees, new visa stickers, long term visa and the new application form (the translated Arabic version had translation mistakes. DE provided a corrected version, format and layout).

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of supporting documents was transmitted to the Visa Committee in December 2019. The LSC received comments from the Visa Committee in January 2020, which were discussed at the LSC meeting of June 2020 and the replies submitted to DG HOME.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

N/A

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

LSC tried to harmonise visa fees collected in the local currency. However, with different exchange rate mechanisms used by each MS, harmonisation was not possible. Some MS adapted their service fee, bringing it closer to the average.

3.5. Exchange of information

In the forum of the LSC, MS continued to routinely exchange information on visa statistics, fraud cases and experience regarding the documentation requirements for visa applications until visa issuance stopped in March 2020 (lockdown).

Compared to the previous year, 2020 visa applications decreased considerably due to the pandemic and related travel restrictions.

- *Quarterly statistics*: statistics and trends were exchanged normally until the lockdown mentioned above.
- *Cases of fraud*: shared on an ad hoc basis between MS and during regular EU anti-fraud meetings.
- *Travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI)*: the EUDEL highlighted that MS are solely responsible for verifying whether insurances presented by applicants are adequate under the terms of Visa Code. Currently, there are a number of insurance companies, which offer travel insurance policies that comply with Schengen rules.

- *Problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules*: one MS experienced problems with the implementation of the TMI rules during LSC and anti-fraud meetings.
- *Cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)*: one MS experienced difficulties to verify bank statements. It was suggested to invite representatives from banks to an LSC meeting.
- *Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises)*: one MS suggested organising (once the health situation allows) a joint LSC inspection of external visa service providers.
- *Use of VISMail and the Visa Information System*: despite past issues with VISMail, no MS signalled problems in 2020.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Consular collaboration focused on exchange of information during the country-wide lockdown and curfews.

4. Challenges

Discuss how external service providers that have gone bankrupt in 2020 can restart their activities, and how to support them.

Imposing and lifting of travel restrictions, exceptions, imperative needs of travel, vaccinated persons.

5. Other issues

N/A



29 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KAZAKHSTAN 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

The European Union Delegation to the Republic of Kazakhstan in Nur-Sultan hosts Schengen States meetings (with Bulgaria and Romania as observers), nowadays in online format. Twenty-one MS (19 Schengen States and two observers) have embassies, most with consular sections, in the capital, Nur-Sultan. There are also five consulates (DE, LT, HU, PL, FR) in Almaty, the former capital. The consulates in Almaty often also cover neighbouring countries, primarily Kyrgyzstan.

Many embassies and consulates work with visa service providers. Some service providers¹⁶ have offices outside of Nur-Sultan and Almaty to reduce the travel time for applicants who do not live in proximity to the embassies or consulates. Due to the vast distances between towns and cities most applicants are unable to apply for their visa in close proximity to their residency.

The harsh climate conditions during the wintertime create an additional burden to applicants.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

During the reporting period, the LSC group in Nur-Sultan held 4 regular meetings on the following dates: 10 February 2020, 3 June 2020, 5 October 2020 and 25 November 2020. Summary reports were drawn up by EUD.

The LSC meetings were organised and chaired by the EU Delegation in Nur-Sultan. The EU Delegation is also in charge of reporting and coordinating the follow-up steps when needed. LSC meetings were organised via Webex after quarantine measurements were introduced, which allowed representatives from the consulates located in Almaty to participate.

The LSC group meetings were very well attended.

At one of its recent meetings, with reference to the “COVID-19: resumption of visa operations” Guidance for structured exchanges in a local Schengen cooperation (LSC) meeting, the LSC group agreed to stick to the existing frequency of its meetings.

¹⁶ For Example service provider “PonyExpress” has twelve regional offices in Kazakhstan: Nur-Sultan (BD), Aktau, Aktobe (BD), Almaty (BD), Atyrau, Karaganda, Kokshetau, Kostanay, Kyzylorda, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, Semey. BD stands for collection of biometric data.

Since the beginning of the COVID-related quarantine, most LSC group members have issued limited amounts of visas. Some LSC group members issue visa in essential cases, which include but are not limited to medical reasons and family reunion purposes. Certain LSC group members issue visa for specific business purposes and student visas. While some member states had to close down their visa centres, others continued to work with theirs.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

In Kazakhstan the Visa Code is well implemented in a coordinated and synchronised manner. The Code proved its relevance as a single unified legal instrument, helping to address effectively common problems raised in relation to the Schengen visa application process. In Kazakhstan, VIS has successfully been applied since 14 November 2013.

In the LSC meetings leading up to February 2020 the implementation of the revised Visa Code rules were discussed to ensure that all Schengen Members carry out the rules in unison. Especially the adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code were discussed and best practices were shared.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

No particular proposals to amend the existing list were raised.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Since the worldwide travel ban was introduced shortly after the revised rules were applicable, most LSC group members were unable to test the adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas in the day to day work scheme. After the travel ban has been lifted, best practices should be shared and if necessary revised.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

LSC members had lengthy discussions regarding the issue of practices on issuing visas for non-married couples; one LSC member suggested to coordinate at the local level as regards the evidence documents that could be provided by applicants concerned. The members agreed that the applicants must be screened thoroughly to ensure that the applicants intend to leave the territory of the Member States before the expiry of the visa.

Some LSC group members drew attention to a problem for their business people to get access to the country, even if they have a valid working visa. It was noted that special exceptions could be provided by the KZ inter-ministerial commission but it seems exceptions are not implemented properly. Some LSC group members think that this issue should be solved before any discussion about visa facilitation for Kazakhstan.

3.5. Exchange of information

Since the start of lockdown in Kazakhstan in March 2020, LSC group had exchange of views on flights, visa policies and statistics in view of COVID-19.

As for quarterly statistics, the new template received from HQ has been shared with the LSC group. Since the representation agreements are currently on hold - at the request of one of LSC members the LSC members discussed how they are functioning and handling issuance of visas for the special groups' travellers, including couples with established relations.

One LSC group member expressed its concern regarding an obstacle that is put by the air companies, in particular when travellers from a **special group** with a valid visa and a letter still are being prevented by the air companies from boarding, and problems also arise at transit points. It is believed that airlines should not do so without contacting competent authorities. This creates more obstacles for travellers. Some countries provide to travellers concerned a letter stating that they belong to a special group. Now these embassies have an extra task to manage logistics of these travellers, which involves a huge amount of paperwork.

One LSC group member noted that even if **representation agreements** are on hold for the moment, it can still issue visas to the asking country (for medical treatment for instance), but it is not easy as there is more bureaucracy involved. It is the case for several LSC group members, which are dealing on a case-by-case basis with requests of their representation partners.

LSC members confirmed that when requested by capitals, they can accept visa applications from other LSC group countries, but it always means additional burden.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

On 10 February 2020 the EU DEL hosted a training on fraud documents for LSC group members. The training was made by experts from DE and NL, and about 38 participants from the LSC group took part in the training.

The EU DEL briefed LSC group on visa issues following meetings with Kazakhstan officials. EU DEL informed LSC group on a regular basis on developments related to Kazakhstan's request for a Visa facilitation agreement. Once again the issue was raised by Kazakhstan at the EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee, held online in September 2020 as well as at the EU-Kazakhstan Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Subcommittee, held in November 2020. During the meetings, the EU side noted that the modernised system of granting Schengen visas is beneficial to Kazakh citizens. Two more specific issues were raised at the JHA meeting, including 90 days entry rule and unfriendly discriminatory rule at the border, in particular the possibility for the Kazakh citizens to have a PCR test at the border, whereas the EU nationals as well as foreign drivers are not allowed to undertake such PCR test at the border, which results in delays.

The pandemic caused a disruption with regard to the simplified short-term visa free stay for the citizens of 57 countries, including EU MS citizens, introduced by Kazakhstan in 2017. The disruption started in March 2020 and then Kazakhstan extended the suspension of the visa-free regime until at least 1 May 2021. Citizens of EU countries with whom Kazakhstan has resumed direct flight connections are able to apply directly for a Kazakh visa. Other foreign citizens must apply for an entry permit that is issued by the Kazakh interior authorities prior to applying for their visa.

Kazakhstan also has changed the procedure for entry into the country for foreign citizens who have a residence permit in Kazakhstan, and foreign citizens that are family members of the Kazakh citizens: they may cross the Kazakhstan border only once in a 90-day period compared with the previous 30-day period. The 30-day rule is only applicable to citizens of EU countries with whom Kazakhstan has resumed direct flight connections. This further complicates not only business travel but also travel to and from Kazakhstan for personal reasons, such as family reunions.

Several EU MS sent Verbal Notes to the Kazakh MFA expressing concerns regarding the issue. It was also raised at the EU-Kazakhstan JHA Subcommittee in November 2020.

4. Challenges

Response to challenges listed in the 2018-2019 report:

Due to COVID-19, most issues presented in the earlier report became less relevant. Concerning the challenge of ‘Implementation and proper interpretation of the new Visa Code’, there was a clear improvement in 2020 as reported under point 3.1.

Subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021):

Most likely, travel and visa complications related to COVID-19 will continue to be the main issues to be addressed. In particular, suspension of the representation agreements will remain a serious issue. Still, further harmonisation will need to be pursued in 2021 (taking into account the limitations of the pandemic). Possibly, the group could return to the standardised documents list, with a view to couples in long-term relationships who are currently not covered by the list.

5. Other issues

No other issues to report.



EUROPEAN UNION

**EUROPEAN UNION OFFICE IN KOSOVO
EUROPEAN UNION SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE**

21 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KOSOVO 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Kosovo hosts Diplomatic Missions of 18 EU Member States. Schengen visas in Kosovo are issued by: Italy (representing also Estonia), Hungary, Slovakia, Greece, Germany, Finland and Slovenia (issues short stay visas for Latvia). Switzerland usually issues Schengen visas on behalf of Austria, Belgium, France, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Norway does it on behalf of Denmark and Iceland. Sweden, Austria and the Czech Republic issue and receive Kosovo's applications for visas in Skopje, capital of North Macedonia. Poland issues Schengen visas for Kosovo passports in Skopje and Tirana. Portugal issues Schengen visas for Kosovo passports in Sofia. An increasing number of EU Member States and Schengen participants have started to use external service providers (VFS Global and TLS Contact) and visas are processed through the Visa Centers in Pristina.

Generally in Kosovo, there has been high and continuously increasing demand for Schengen visa applications over the last two years in the absence of a pending decision on Kosovo's visa liberalisation. The 2020 COVID 19 pandemic and closure of borders from 16 March to June 2020 and other related travel restrictions throughout 2020 have resulted in decrease of Schengen visa applications and impacted the functioning of visa services provided by the Schengen participants. Throughout 2020, the unfavourable epidemiological situation in Kosovo and in Europe did not allow full resumption of the regular Schengen visa operations. Moreover, the representation mandates for Schengen visa issuance by Switzerland were suspended with the EU Member States (FR, NL, BE, AT, Liechtenstein, Lux) and external service providers were temporarily closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Norway also temporarily suspended the representation agreement with Denmark and Iceland.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

From January to December 2020, the European Union Office in Kosovo convened three LSC meetings on 28 January, 18 June 2020 and 5 November 2020. The last two meetings took place virtually. In addition, the EU Office assured regular exchange on LSC related matters and updates from Brussels via a Whats App group and by email. The meetings were organised by the LSC policy officer and chaired by the Head of Political, Economic and European Integration Section. The attendance and exchange of information in the LSC meetings have been consistently good and have further improved during the reporting period. Given Kosovo's small size, it is sufficient to coordinate LSC in meetings in Pristina, where all the Diplomatic Missions are located.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

The New Visa Code applicable since February 2020 could not be fully tested and implemented due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions. Most visa sections were operating in shifts with overall reduced visa services. Some Schengen participants dealt only with emergency, essential travel cases. Some of them had to further reduce their services because of positive COVID-19 case among their staff, while some Schengen participants started to provide since July 2020 visas for family members (Norway, Sweden, Finland). Most continued to issue only emergency and special categories visas (HU, SK, DE, etc.) Some Visa sections concentrated on backlog of national visas, work visas for skilled workers and only issued emergency Schengen visas. Since the start of the pandemic Switzerland suspended the representation mandates for Schengen visa issuance with the EU Member States (FR, NL, BE, AT, Liechtenstein, Lux) and provided support only on a case by case basis. Norway also temporarily suspended the representation agreement with Denmark and Iceland. The External Service providers remained temporarily closed for some periods in 2020. For Norway, VFS in Pristina reopened in July, while it remained closed for Sweden and Austria and it was necessary to go to Skopje for a visa appointment.

In the absence of and expectations for the delayed Visa Liberalisation decision for Kosovo over the last two years, the visa policy is quite a sensitive topic in Kosovo. The Schengen participants expected negative public reaction especially to the increase of the visa fee, and requested a common LTT that was prepared within the LSC in January 2020. In the end, such reaction did not materialise.

However, the differentiation of the visa fee in Kosovo among Schengen participants was further accentuated by the new Visa Code. While 14 Schengen participants raised the visa fees in accordance to the new Visa Code, 5 Schengen participants decided to keep the fee at €35. Moreover, when Schengen participants use a service provider the extra fee is for VFS Global €20 and for TLS Contact €23. No Schengen participant intends to completely exempt the minors from the visa fee, although variation of discounted policy for minors applies.

Most Schengen participants welcomed the longer visa application period of 6 months prior to travel. As regards the simplified visa application procedures, there is currently no possibility to fill in and sign the visa application electronically. For most Diplomatic Missions it is possible to apply for visas in place of residence in Kosovo (except CZ-Skopje).

Some Schengen participants consider the Travel Medical Insurance as a challenge during the Pandemic, as most travel insurance companies in Kosovo do not include COVID-19 coverage into the travel medical insurance. A Joint LSC letter was drafted and sent to the umbrella organization Kosovo Insurance Bureau with a view to obtaining clarifications on the pandemic coverage in Kosovo while stressing that this is a requirement under the existing Schengen visa rules.

As regards the VIS Mail, see section 3.5.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonisation of the list of supporting documents has been completed in Kosovo in 2012. The harmonised list of documents is being used, and sometimes other documents might be requested. There was a suggestion to amend and update the existing list during the reporting period to include the ATK document (tax administration of Kosovo's document) that proves if the company or the person has paid the taxes and the requirement to proof close family relations with the certificates.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Most Kosovars are interested in multiple-entry Schengen visas. However, some Schengen participants, quoting abuses of the previous visas or first time visas, only issue single or double entry visas. There was initial scepticism among some Schengen participants in relation to the issuance of multiple entry visas with longer validity. They see it as challenging in Kosovo as it is hard to check the correct usage of the visa and there is relatively high abuse of Schengen visas. Due to attempts to find quicker way to get an appointment and due to lack of awareness on the competent Consulate to apply to, most people try to find the easiest and fastest way to get the Schengen visa.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

Full resumption of visa operations had not materialized in 2020 due to unfavourable epidemiological situation both in Kosovo and Europe. Some preparation and coordination of visa services resumption within the LSC took place and a joint questionnaire on resumption of visa operations was prepared in June 2020. At the end of the year it became clear that more efforts will be needed for harmonized resumption of visa operations once travel restrictions are lifted. In view of improving harmonisation, an overview table of visa categories that can currently receive visas has been prepared within the LSC in 2020 and shared among the Schengen participants.

3.5. Exchange of information

Member States continued to submit visa-related statistics. While not all of them have been doing it regularly, overall the practice of sharing monthly visa statistics has improved. There is certainly scope to improve the information exchange in this regard both on the timely reception and the dissemination part with the new unified visa statistics templates.

The EU Office functional mailbox and the common mailing list have proved useful tools for Member States as regards the exchange of statistics but also as a tool to share information of common interest. A questionnaire dealing with fraud had been consolidated within the LSC.

As regards the VIS Mail, the 31 January 2020 was set as the compliance deadline for Kosovo. Some Schengen participants informed before the deadline that they do not have the system installed or face recurrent technical difficulties to use it on a daily basis.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Meeting with the Director of Department of Migration, Asylum and Citizenship (DCAM) and the Head of Division for migration data in DCAM and head of Government Authority on Migration of the Ministry of Interior has been organized to share update on migratory situation in Kosovo. A meeting with the Acting Head of the Kosovo Consular Department was also organized.

4. Challenges

In last years during normal visa operations the main challenges and breaches of the Visa Code in Kosovo were related to general high demand and long waiting periods, the admissibility of visa requests (art.19) and the validity of the visas issued (art. 24 par. 2, 3). High prevalence of visa shopping and relatively high refusal rate 20-30% linked to not harmonized list of appointments and other differentiated practices among Schengen participants linked to visa issuance (visa fee, visa duration, etc.) were also challenges. Several Member States raised the problem of frequent use of fake supporting documents for the visa application such as bank statements, TATIM and Trusti documents or fake transaction for the visa fee. Abuses of the visa appointment booking systems, reportedly by travel agencies that then sell the places to the applicants were also reported.

In the absence of a Visa Facilitation Agreement between Kosovo and the EU, the EU Member States continue to apply different visa application fees, which was further accentuated by the new Visa Code (see above). Some EU Member States use the €35 visa fee for Kosovo passports based on the EU-Serbia Visa Facilitation Agreement or on the basis of a political decision taken by their capitals, while most apply the €80 visa fee. The current practice of differentiated visa fees, even as regards children is one of the factors that contribute to visa shopping. Into consideration should also be taken the fact that apart from Kosovo passports, Serbs in Kosovo still have, in some cases, Koordinaciona Uprava passports (see below, 5.). Practices of visa fees vary also in this case.

In July 2018, the European Commission confirmed that Kosovo has fulfilled all the 95 visa liberalisation roadmap benchmarks and recommended to the EP and the EU Member States to grant Kosovo visa liberalisation. However, the decision of EU Member States on the matter has been long delayed and it remains to be seen if consensus on Kosovo visa liberalisation will be found in 2021. In the meanwhile, some Member States already turned to outsourcing of the visa application process to address the challenge of high demand.

Most participants reported about the challenge of intermediaries, mainly Travel Agencies and most recently parallel Visa Centres, which build business schemes around the visa application process and continuously misinform people. The travel agencies also abuse the online booking system by booking all the slots that are later sold for extra fee to their clients. The EU offered to collect the information about the abusive practices of the travel agencies and parallel visa centres and to pass it on to the Kosovo Police for further investigation.

The challenge in Kosovo also remains the use of falsified supporting documents, bank accounts, TATIM and Trusti documents or fake transactions for the visa fee. A questionnaire dealing with fraud had been consolidated within the LSC with recommendations on possible counter measures and this issue will continue to be on the agenda in the 2021.

Challenges were also reported in dealing with local administration, tax authorities and Civil Registration Agency especially as regards timely responses to requests related to visa applicants. In 2021, the LSC will reach out to establish better cooperation with local authorities.

One of the challenges also debated in the context of the Visa Liberalisation is the relatively high visa refusal rate for Kosovars -on average 20-30%, being the result of multiple factors. In order to deal with the abuse of Schengen visas it was suggested by the destination countries to set up more thorough controls at first Schengen entry/exit points and raise public awareness about the strict visa rules.

In 2021, the LSC will aim to contribute to the harmonisation of resumption of visa operations, once travel restrictions are lifted. Focus will also be on the COVID-19 coverage by Travel Medical Insurance in Kosovo and overall application of the new Visa Code- MEV cascades.

The LSC meetings continue to contribute to exchange of experience and best practices and examples to fight other phenomena and challenges in the Kosovo context.

It is clear that many of the current LSC challenges will be tackled by the introduction of the visa free regime, although this might in turn bring new challenges.

5. Other issues

Koordinaciona Uprava (KU) passports are passports issued by Serbian Coordination Directorate (in Serbian Координациона управа / *Koordinaciona uprava*) to Serbian citizens residing in Kosovo. KU passports are not recognized by Kosovo but accepted by most EU Member States and Schengen participants. They are not biometric and their holders will not be able to benefit from eventual visa liberalisation for Kosovo same as they currently do not benefit from the Serbian visa free regime with the. The question is whether their holders will be able and willing to get the Kosovo documents and are not left behind in case Kosovo reaches the visa free. The issue of KU passports might need to be considered also in connection with the update of the current visa rules.

**LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Bishkek, KYRGYZ REPUBLIC
2020 REPORT**

1. Introduction

3 EU Member States are present in capital - Bishkek with resident Embassy (DE, FR, HU).

7 Schengen Member States are represented by Germany (BE, GR, LU, NL, PT, SE, NO). Germany has additional Schengen representation in city of Osh.

8 Schengen Member States are represented by Switzerland (FR, PL, FI, CZ, SI, SK, EE, LV).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Impact of Covid-19: general stop of travelling (incl. regular flight operations) to the EU from mid of March 2020 until mid of August 2020.

Basically no visas were delivered during that time, as due to the lack of flights it was not possible to travel; only very few and specific cases were treated.

Schengen visa representation for other Schengen Member States has been suspended since mid of March 2020; only very few ad-hoc representations since then.

2 LSC meetings took place in the course of 2020 (March and December). Additional meeting in summer was combined Schengen/ Consular.

The VAC in Osh is coordinated by the German Embassy only, therefore no further coordination with the LSC.

Visa operations for Switzerland mostly stopped due to COVID-19 issues.

3. State of play

3.1. Application of the Visa Code

Due to the extremely volatile situation during COVID-19 pandemic, new regulations and restrictions have been enforced on a very short notice. Nevertheless, Schengen visa issuing Member States did their best to ensure that all the regulations of the Visa Code are met.

Based on the general stoppage of visa applications, CH only issued visas for medical, humanitarian and national interest reasons.

In general the new rules were accepted quite well by the Visa applicants. The new regulation implementing a harmonised approach to the issuing of multiple entry visas to regular entry visas made it easier for Schengen visa issuing Member States to justify the length of the issued visa. Due to the general termination of regular Schengen visa applications starting mid-March 2020 due to COVID-19, the assessment only covers limited time span of the situation in early 2020.

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Schengen visa issuing Member States present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

CH issues MEVs according to the cascade system or more generously.

3.4. Harmonisation of practices

In order to ensure exchange and harmonisation, meetings on a regular basis are planned once the delivery of Schengen visa will resume.

3.5. Exchange of information

No further exchange of information currently due to COVID-19 related termination of Schengen visa service.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

No other initiative taken, mostly due to COVID-19 related lack of activities.

4. Challenges

Next reporting period will focus on the development of visa application and delivery in 2021 and in light of the development of COVID-19 situation.

5. Other issues

No comment on other issues.

This report has been approved by all Schengen visas issuing Member States present in the country.



25 February 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Lao PDR REPORT

1. Introduction

Two Member States (France and Germany) are present, providing representation for another 17 Member States (France representing 10 and Germany 7) in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

COVID-19 has severely affected the Schengen visa operations as the amount of requests has dropped by over 90%. Usually in pre-pandemic years FR and DE Embassies combined would issue approximately 5000 visas per year and with the visas issued representing other Member States taken into account, the highest demand typically observed between April and October. Due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions, since late March the number of applications for Schengen visas has reduced to almost none with some exceptions for spouses of European nationals.

As there are only two Member States present and considering the significantly reduced workload, there have been no formal LSC meetings in 2020 and all Schengen-related questions have been solved informally and bilaterally.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

There have been no specific problems related to the implementation of the Visa Code. MS are well prepared to ensure that the tasks as set by the Visa Code are carried out.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired. The implementation of the list of the documents has been agreed by both MS and all irregularities are discussed if issues arise.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The "MEV cascades" has not been fully applied in practice because of the significantly reduced demand for Schengen visas since March 2020.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

As only two EU MS present in Laos are issuing Schengen visas, there coordination and harmonisation has been easily achieved by regular informal contacts in case of need.

3.4 Exchange of information

- *Quarterly statistics* – statistics are exchanged once per year or upon request. As for 2020, the drop in demand has rendered more regular exchanges unnecessary until normality resumes.
- *cases of fraud* – not relevant during 2020 but several trends were observed in the previous years concerning Bangladeshi and Turkish nationals; information was transmitted to the concerned Embassies.
- *travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI)* – information exchanged between the EU MS. Two local insurance companies providing adequate TMI but policies issued by Thai companies are prevalent and accepted. European travel insurances purchasable online are also accepted.
- *any problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules* – none identified.
- *cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)* – rarely practiced, not common and particularly useful in the Lao context.
- *cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises)* – DE has satisfactory experience of cooperation with VFS.
- *use of VISMail and the Visa Information System* – rarely used yet, no known issues.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

None.

4. Challenges

No challenges identified at the moment.

5. Other issues

None.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION IN MEXICO

3rd February 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Mexico 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

The Delegation of the European Union to Mexico is responsible for the organisation, chairing and follow-up of Local Schengen Cooperation meetings. The LSC group in Mexico consists of 19 EU Member States (CY closed down its Embassy in Mexico in February 2020) and two non-EU Schengen countries, Switzerland and Norway that are represented in Mexico as well as the EUDEL. Since the shift to virtual meetings during the pandemic, EU MS not represented in Mexico are also invited to participate in meetings. Non-represented MS have therefore attended some of the meetings. It is worth noting that ES has Consulates General in Guadalajara and Monterrey.

Austria (for Schengen visas also representing Malta); **Belgium** (also representing Luxembourg and Slovenia in Schengen visas); **Bulgaria** (not applying the common visa policy in full, always invited to LSC meetings); **Czech Republic**; **Denmark** (also issuing Schengen visas for Sweden, Norway and Iceland); **Finland**, **France**, **Germany**, **Greece**, **Hungary**, **Italy**, **Netherlands**, **Poland**, **Portugal**; **Romania** (not applying the common visa policy in full, always invited to LSC meetings); **Slovakia** (for Schengen visas representing Latvia); **Spain** (for Schengen visas representing Estonia); **Sweden** (Schengen visas for Sweden are issued by Denmark); **Norway** (Schengen visas for Norway are issued by Denmark); **Switzerland** (also issuing Schengen visas for Liechtenstein); **EU Delegation** (chair).

Since Lithuania has neither a representation arrangement nor consulates in Mexico applicants for Schengen visa shall apply at the Lithuanian Embassy to the United States of America and to the United Mexican States.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Covid-19 led many MS to put on hold their visa operations for health safety reasons. In July 2020, Mexico did not feature in the list of countries for which the Council of the European Union recommended to lift pandemic-related restrictions in entering the Schengen area. Mexican citizens do not need a Schengen visa to enter the EU, and therefore the issuing of Schengen visas by MS consulates was already limited prior to the start of the pandemic.

In the reporting period, **three** LSC meetings were held in March, June and September of 2020. Moreover, an ad-hoc meeting with the main airlines operating from Mexico to the Schengen area was held in December to facilitate work related to the application of entry requirements into the Schengen area. Only the March meeting was held in person due to the pandemic, but coordination of LSC remained very positive via virtual meetings which were very well attended (additionally, MS exchange information very actively via a consular whatsapp group). The LSC meeting reports drawn up by the EUDEL are shared with the MS locally.

Outside the capital city, ES is the only MS to have professional consular representations (General Consulates) in Guadalajara (State of Jalisco) and Monterrey (State of Nuevo León). For this reason, there are no additional regional LSC groups in Mexico.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

Due to the EU-Mexico tourist visa waiver agreement (VWA), Mexican nationals are exempted from Schengen visas. Therefore, the number of Schengen visa applications in Mexico (by third country nationals only) is limited. Due to the entry restrictions in relation to the pandemic to the Schengen area recommended by the Council in July, the issuing of Schengen visas was drastically reduced. Larger Member States normally issue approx. 150 Schengen visas per year (refusal rate ca. 2%), with the special case of ES issuing over 200 Schengen visas a year (with a refusal rate of ca. 10%). That number was less this year due to the pandemic, approximately 50). Medium/smaller Schengen States normally do not issue more than 40 Schengen visas annually and this year that number was much less too.

As far as the cost of Schengen visas is concerned, MS apply different exchange rates and also update them with different regularity, mostly according to instructions from their capitals. It is therefore impossible to have one uniform visa fee in the local currency. However, the differences in fees for Schengen visas are minimal and do not lead to visa shopping.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of supporting documents was adopted by the LSC in 2019 and its implementation has not encountered any major difficulties so far, although experience is limited due to the pause in the issuing of Schengen visas during the pandemic.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In the LSC meeting of June 2020, the EUDEL updated participants on Schengen-related information, recalling that the revised Visa Code came into force on 2nd February 2020 and that the revised Handbook became applicable as of 25 March 2020. EUDEL informed about the application of provisions on Multiple Entry Visas, noting that in the near future a discussion will need to take place to ensure a harmonised application at the local level that prevents forum shopping.

d. Harmonisation of practices

Not applicable

e. Exchange of information

An ad-hoc meeting with the main airlines operating from Mexico to the Schengen area was held on 17 December 2020 in order to establish a working relationship and information exchange that would facilitate the airlines' work in case of discrepancies among Member States in the way they interpret requirements for entering the Schengen area. The objective is to reduce the number of

cases in which airlines might refuse passengers to board planes bound for the Schengen area due to uncertainty in the way the rules are being applied by different Member States

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

None

4. Challenges

Subject to a degree of normality returning to Mexico in 2021 that would allow MS consulates to restart visa operations, it would be worthwhile to assess and address any issues linked to the resumption of such services. It would also be pertinent to assess in more depth the application of the rules agreed locally for the harmonisation of supporting documents and seek to address any issues that may arise.

5. Other issues

None



26.01.2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MOLDOVA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

15 Member States are present in the Republic of Moldova (from which 13 are Schengen countries) and all are represented in Chisinau. Hungary manages a Common Application Centre for 16 EU MS who do not have visa sections in Chisinau. A few Member States have consulates or honorary consuls located outside the capital (such as Cahul, Ungheni, Balti).

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

After the Covid-19 crisis hit the Republic of Moldova (RM) all Member States suspended their consular services (visa included) and only attend to emergency cases. End of summer, most Member States resumed their services, however with limited appointments especially in the field of Schengen visas, as there are only a limited number of travel purposes that allow applicants to enter Schengen countries due to lockdown restrictions.

In 2020, two LSC meeting took place back to back with Consular meetings: in January 27th and in October 22nd (the latter was the first meeting held online). As it was held via webex, it was also very well attended by colleagues from Bucharest and Kyiv, who usually cannot take part in the personal meetings. Germany holding the presidency at that moment chaired the second meeting.

Usually two personal meetings are held a year. They are coordinated by the EU Delegation and Romania as Romania is in the lead for the Consular cooperation. The personal meetings are always well attended by the Consular and Visa Staff of the MS represented in the RM. Under mutual consent there is no official report drawn.

No additional cooperation is needed in locations outside Chisinau.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

MS and EU Delegation are well prepared to ensure all tasks to be carried out under the visa code.

Due to the visa free regime for citizens of the RM who hold a biometrical passport only a limited number of Schengen visa applications need to be dealt with.

During the LSC meetings none of the MSs mentioned problems about the implementation of the Visa Code (only a limited number of visa cases was dealt with during the reporting period).

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

A harmonised list of supporting documents is available: C(2014)2737/F1 (30/04/2014).

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Article 24(2) Visa Code is applied by all MS issuing Schengen visas.

d. Harmonisation of practices

Cooperation within the LSC meetings and bilateral consultations in case of doubt.

e. Exchange of information

Statistics, information on cases of fraud, TMI, cooperation with local authorities and external service providers as well as other issues are exchanged orally at the LSC meetings and by bilateral consultations if need be. VISMail can be used (a test mail was exchanged between Hungary and Germany in October 2018).

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

A WhatsApp Group to coordinate LSC was established and proved to be extremely useful in times of crisis.

4. Challenges

Within the next reporting period (2021) the MS need to put a special focus on harmonised resumption of regular of Schengen visa processing after the Covid-19 crisis will be ended successfully and short term travelling will increase again.

5. Other issues

In the reporting period the LSC and the WhatsApp platform was mostly used for exchanging information about travel restrictions of the RM.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO MONTENEGRO

Podgorica, 29 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MONTENEGRO 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Currently, 14 EU MS Embassies (GR, AT, GB, CZ, FR, SI, IT, BG, HU, SK, PL, DE, RO, HR), one Consul - Gerant (HR in Kotor's consulate) and six Honorary Consuls representing eight EU MS (DK/SE, BE/LU, MT, BG, SL, HU) are present in Montenegro.

15 EU MS (AT, BE, DK, EE, ES, FR, LV, LT, LU, HU, NL, PL, PT, SK and SI) agreed to turn the consular function of issuing "Schengen visas C" to the Common Application Centre Podgorica (CAC) which functions within the structure of the Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Two Local Schengen Group meetings were organised during the reporting period. Both meetings were organized by the EU Delegation (EUD) and chaired by the EUD Consular Correspondent. In 2020, the EUD continued to fulfil co-ordination role by facilitating information exchange via the EU consular and Schengen co-operation mailing network, and the established Viber group that was particularly active during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The first LSC meeting was convened in the EU Delegation premises in June 2020 and attended by resident EU MS, while non-resident EU MS followed the meeting via WebEX. The issuance of the new communication on gradual lifting of travel restrictions in the EU and its external borders was announced during the meeting as well as the guidance for a phased and coordinated return of visa operations to normal was discussed. Participants were informed that the Handbook on the administrative management of visa processing and LSC (Visa Code Handbook II) was adopted in March 2020 containing more detailed chapter on the coordination of and work in local Schengen cooperation. EU MS exchanged information about the state of play of their visa operations following the COVID-19 outbreak in spring. The CAC remained closed since 16 March and concerned EU MS were asked to send written requests in case they need assistance for visa issuance. During the meeting, BG and PL informed that they resumed their visa operations, IT stopped issuing visas since 15 March, DE and DK only issued visas in case of emergency.

The second LSC meeting was organised entirely via WebEX in November 2020 and the EU MS exchanged details about the organization of work during continuous COVID-19 outbreak. DE informed that the work was organised in two rotating teams and only urgent visa applications were issued. SI Embassy (CAC) and IT noted the partial resumption of operations.

Visa statistics

From the beginning of January to the end of December 2020, the CAC issued 163 visas (including 6 D visas) and one visa was refused. In addition, IT issued 89 visas; DE issued 34 visas and 31 visas were refused.

Observer countries

Romanian Embassy had two reported cases of frauds whereby two Albanian citizens tried to enter Montenegro with false Romanian passports, however they were apprehended by the Montenegrin border police.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

As reported to the EU Delegation, SI (CAC) is prepared to ensure the implementation of tasks that need to be carried out under the Visa Code. No specific problems were noted with regard to the implementation of the Visa Code. DE also mentioned the absence of any specific issues with regard to the application of the Visa Code and harmonisation of practises.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

According to SI (CAC) assessment, the harmonisation of practices has been already acquired.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

SI confirmed that it already applies the so-called MEV cascade following the definition of the Commission (*agreed approach of how many previous visas the applicant has to prove to qualify for a long-validity MEV and how the length of validity for each subsequent visa would increase*).

d. Harmonisation of practices

No specific issues were reported by the EU MS in this regard.

e. Exchange of information

SI (CAC) continues to provide monthly statistics on the issuance of visas to the EU Delegation and the 14 EU MS it represents. SI is active participant of the Viber consular group and communicates information required by resident and non-resident EU MS colleagues upon request. SI also retrieves information and answer questions via VISMail when requested.

According to DE assessment, currently there is a sufficient exchange of information, including in the EU MS LSC group.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Nothing to report.

4. Challenges

The co-operation on the LSC related issues has been well established in Montenegro and continued in the COVID context. Although the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak in 2021 might pose some additional challenges, the experience of 2020 confirmed the continuation of the ‘business as usual’ mode to the possible extent.

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.



Rabat, le 4 mars 2021
Ares(2021)1626524

**COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN
ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC)
AUPRES DU ROYAUME DU MAROC
RAPPORT 2020**

1. Introduction

17 Etats membres de l'espace Schengen ont une présence diplomatique/consulaire au Maroc: AT (Rabat), BE (Rabat, Casablanca), CH (Rabat), CZ (Rabat), DE (Rabat), DK (Rabat), EL (Rabat, Casablanca), ES (Agadir, Casablanca, Nador, Rabat, Tanger et Tétouan), FI (Rabat), FR (Agadir, Casablanca, Fès, Marrakech, Rabat et Tanger), HU (Rabat), IT (Rabat, Casablanca), NL (Rabat), NO (Rabat), PL (Rabat), PT (Rabat), SE (Rabat).

A partir du 1^{er} septembre 2021, les consulats FR à Agadir, Fès, Marrakech et Tanger n'assureront plus de services visa. Des « hubs visa » seront mis en place à Rabat et Casablanca.

En ce qui concerne la BE, depuis le 1^{er} juillet 2020, les compétences consulaires du Consulat Général à Casablanca ont été transférés à l'Ambassade à Rabat. A Casablanca, une Agence Consulaire restera temporairement fonctionnelle, uniquement pour le traitement des demandes de visa.

DK a transféré son service visa (notamment la décision) à Dubaï, le 1^{er} juillet 2020.

Accords de représentation pour les questions de visa: AT, BE, DK¹⁷, SE, IT représentent respectivement SK, LU, NO, IS, MT. DE représente SI et LT.¹⁸ CZ reçoit et traite également les demandes de visa des ressortissants mauritaniens.

Recours aux prestataires de service extérieurs pour la réception des demandes de visa: AT, HR, NL, PT, NL et SE utilisent les services de VFS Global ; DE, BE, DK/NO, FR et IT utilisent les services de TLS Contact ; ES a recours aux services du prestataire BLS.

¹⁷ L'accord entre DK et NO pour les questions de visa est actuellement suspendu. DK reçoit et traite également les demandes de visa des ressortissants mauritaniens et tunisiens.

¹⁸ En cas d'opinion négative DE contacte les deux pays en question qui renvoient le dossier et émettent le cas échéant le refus officiel.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

La pandémie de COVID-19 a eu un impact majeur sur les opérations de visa des Etats Membres. L'état d'urgence sanitaire est entré en vigueur au Maroc le 20 mars 2020 et a été prolongé tous les mois depuis cette date. Dans le cadre de l'état d'urgence sanitaire, les frontières aériennes, terrestres et maritimes du Maroc restent officiellement fermées. Toutefois, le Maroc a autorisé la reprise des liaisons aériennes et maritimes pour permettre à certaines catégories de personnes d'entrer sur le territoire marocain et d'en ressortir.

Dans ces circonstances, les déplacements internationaux vers l'espace Schengen ont été très restreints à partir du mois de mars. La délivrance de visas uniformes (Schengen) a été en grande partie suspendue, sauf quelques exceptions : soins médicaux, visites familiales pour retours impérieux (partenaires qui sont séparés depuis plus de 6 mois, enterrement, mariage), visa de circulation, voyage d'études, transporteurs routiers. Certains consulats sollicitent une attestation de voyage essentiel, dont la délivrance se fait en concertation avec la police de frontière et sur présentation d'un dossier avec documents à l'appui. Le test PCR est obligatoire pour l'entrée dans plusieurs Etats membres. Dans cette période, les consulats ont délivré prioritairement des visas nationaux (étudiants, regroupement familial, travail). Dans ce contexte, les consulats ont remarqué une hausse importante du nombre des demandes de visas nationaux.

Pendant cette période particulière les consulats ont été confrontés à des défis spécifiques, liés aux différentes restrictions (confinement, restrictions de déplacement, villes fermées, distanciation physique) :

- - des dizaines de milliers de rendez-vous reportés ;
- - des visas périmés ;
- - accueil d'un nombre limité de visiteurs au niveau des consulats ;
- - impossibilité d'accueillir les demandeurs provenant des villes marocaines fermées ;
- - ralentissement des activités des prestataires extérieurs ;
- - nombre important de passeports des demandeurs qui n'ont pas pu être retirés par leurs titulaires ;
- - des assurances médicales de voyage qui excluent les prestations liées à la COVID (aucune assurance ne couvre les pandémies) ;
- - problèmes de ressources humaines (notamment pendant la période des congés d'été et de la rotation annuelle).

Malgré les contraintes, **5 réunions ordinaires** ont été organisées dans la période de référence (en janvier, juin, juillet, septembre et novembre 2020), dont 4 en format virtuel. La participation des Etats membres représentés au Maroc aux réunions est nombreuse. BG, HR, RO sont invités systématiquement en tant qu'observateurs pour échanger des informations sur des questions relatives aux visas.

La coordination des réunions LSC est assurée par la Délégation de l'UE au Maroc. Les rapports des réunions LSC sont établis par la Délégation avec des contributions des membres LSC et ensuite partagés avec les missions diplomatiques des Etats membres. Les Etats membres communiquent les rapports à leurs capitales.

Les consulats des Etats membres en dehors de Rabat sont invités systématiquement aux réunions. Pendant la période de référence, le déroulement des réunions en format virtuel a facilité leur participation. Ils reçoivent les rapports et les conclusions des réunions LSC à travers leurs missions diplomatiques à Rabat et/ou directement de la Délégation de l'UE.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

Les missions diplomatiques des Etats membres et la Délégation de l'UE ont activement collaboré dans le cadre de la coopération consulaire au titre de Schengen, en conformité avec les dispositions du Code des Visas. Dans la période de référence, l'activité de coopération a été axée principalement sur l'échange d'informations concernant :

- la mise en œuvre de la Décision d'exécution de la Commission C(2019)5432 du 25 juillet 2019 ;
- les cas de fraude et l'utilisation de faux documents pour l'obtention de visas ;
- la délivrance et l'utilisation des visas à entrées multiples ;
- les délais de rendez-vous et de décision relative à la demande ;
- l'analyse du risque en matière d'immigration et de sécurité ;
- les signalements dans le système SIS, d'autres échanges d'informations (signalements/ alertes) entre les consulats concernant les demandeurs de visa, la protection des données personnelles des demandeurs de visa ;
- la relation avec les prestataires de service extérieurs pour la réception des demandes de visas.

Spécificités locales (avant la pandémie) :

- Dans le cas de certains consulats, les délais de rendez-vous peuvent dépasser 3 mois. Le manque de ressources humaines suffisantes semble être la cause principale de cette situation, dans un contexte de pression sans précédent au niveau de la demande.
- De nombreuses tentatives de fraude, notamment la falsification des justificatifs relatifs à la situation socio-professionnelle (attestations de travail, permis de séjour) et financière (relevés de compte bancaire) des demandeurs de visa, mais aussi des cas de mariage suspect (mariages "blancs" ou "gris") avec des ressortissants UE.
- La saturation des capacités des consulats les plus demandés a aussi pour conséquence un phénomène de "visa-shopping" important au niveau des autres représentations Schengen au Maroc qui, à leur tour, voient leurs capacités saturées avec pour conséquence, entre autres, un impact négatif sur leur image/réputation.

- Les consulats font plus d'attention à « l'overstaying » et aux enfants mineurs qui sont laissés sur le territoire des Etats membres.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

Sur la base de la proposition du LSC, la Commission européenne a adopté le 25 juillet 2019 la décision d'exécution C(2019)5432 modifiant la décision d'exécution C(2015)6940, en ce qui concerne le titre et la liste des documents justificatifs devant être produits par les demandeurs de visa de court séjour au Maroc. L'ensemble des consulats des Etats membres au Maroc a mis en œuvre la décision d'exécution.

3.3 Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

Le sujet de l'adaptation éventuelle au niveau local des règles générales a fait l'objet des discussions lors des réunions de coordination. La plupart des Etats membres sont satisfaits par le modèle de cascade prévu par le Code des Visas et suivent les règles générales pour la délivrance des MEV. A ce stade, une adaptation des règles ne paraît pas nécessaire. En revanche, plusieurs consulats n'ont pas eu l'occasion de tester suffisamment la « cascade » proposée par le Code des Visas révisé, en raison de la pandémie.

3.4 Echange d'informations

L'échange d'informations entre les membres de LSC se déroule à l'occasion des réunions de coordination et/ou via e-mail. Les membres de LSC échangent régulièrement et/ou ad-hoc, en fonction des besoins, des informations statistiques sur les visas délivrés/ refusés, les cas ou les suspicions de fraude et d'utilisation de faux documents, le fonctionnement du système VIS, les articles de presse concernant la problématique Schengen.

Les membres LSC disposent d'un groupe WhatsApp pour échanger de manière rapide et informelle des informations non-classifiées et d'intérêt commun sur les questions de visa (et aussi sur les questions consulaires).

L'utilisation du VISMail par les membres de LSC reste sous-optimale. L'importance d'utiliser ce système pour les échanges entre les consulats a été soulignée à plusieurs reprises lors des réunions.

Dans le contexte de la pandémie les échanges au sein du LSC ont porté également sur d'autres questions spécifiques, en particulier la mise en œuvre de la recommandation concernant la levée progressive de la restriction temporaire des déplacements non essentiels vers l'UE, la reprise harmonisée du traitement et de la délivrance des visas Schengen, ainsi que les restrictions en vigueur au niveau des frontières marocaines et européennes.

3.5 D'autres initiatives

Dans la période de référence les Etats membres ont participé à **1 réunion consacrée à la fraude documentaire**, organisée en février 2020 à l'initiative du groupe des pays nordiques (DK, SE, FI, NO), avec la participation des membres LSC et des pays tiers.

Plusieurs Etats membres ont décidé ou envisagent de mettre en place **le système de prépaiement** afin de réduire le "no-show".

FR a mis en place trois filières distinctes de rendez-vous pour les demandes de visa court séjour : a) renouvellement du visa de circulation; b) demandeurs qui ont déjà reçu des visas de 1, 3 ou 6 mois ; c) primo-demandeurs.

4. Défis

Réponses apportées aux défis mentionnés dans le rapport 2018-2019

Délais de rendez-vous et le signalement des besoins des consulats en termes de ressources humaines : Le LSC a élaboré en décembre 2019 un rapport conjoint sur les problèmes de délais d'attente pour un rendez-vous de visa, qui identifie les causes principales et les implications de cette situation. Le rapport a été transmis à la DG HOME et partagé avec les Etats membres. Les Chefs de mission ainsi que le LSC ont recommandé qu'une discussion sur cette question et sur les possibles réponses se tienne à Bruxelles au niveau des instances préparatoires du Conseil (notamment les groupes "Visas" et "MaMa").

Mise en œuvre de la liste des documents justificatifs devant être produits par les demandeurs de visa de court séjour au Maroc (décision d'exécution C(2019) 5432 le 25 juillet 2019) : l'ensemble des consulats des Etats membres au Maroc a mis en œuvre la décision d'exécution et utilise la nouvelle liste.

Mise en œuvre du Code des Visas révisé : à cause de la pandémie, la période de référence n'a pas permis véritablement une analyse approfondie sur la mise en œuvre par les consulats des dispositions du Code révisé. Dans la période de référence le LSC a eu plusieurs échanges sur la nécessité de l'adaptation éventuelle au niveau local des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »).

Points à traiter au cours du prochain exercice (2021)

La reprise coordonnée des opérations de visas après la levée des restrictions de voyage vers l'UE.

La mise en œuvre du Code des Visas révisé : continuation des discussions sur l'harmonisation au niveau local des procédures de délivrance des visas à entrées multiples.

Renforcer davantage la coopération au niveau local entre les consulats des Etats membres afin d'améliorer les systèmes de prise de rendez-vous et minimiser les risques de « visa shopping ».

Ce rapport a été approuvé par tous les États membres présents au Maroc.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

25/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MOSCOW, ST-PETERSBURG and EKATERINBURG 2019-2020 REPORT¹⁹

1. Introduction

All Schengen Member States/associated Member States remain present in **Moscow** with the exception of Liechtenstein, which is represented by Switzerland.

15 Schengen Member States/associated Member States remain present in **St. Petersburg**²⁰. Belgium, Denmark, Malta, Portugal, and Sweden only rely on external service providers (ESPs) in St. Petersburg. In addition, in St. Petersburg Austria is represented by Finland; Liechtenstein is represented by Switzerland, Luxembourg by the Netherlands and Slovenia by Latvia.

3 Schengen Member States/associated Member States remain present in **Ekaterinburg**²¹.

By the end of December 2020, only few of the Member States do not use external service providers for the collection of visa applications and return of passports. Representation arrangements have been established at least in Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Murmansk, Petrozavodsk, Pskov, Rostov on Don and Sovetsk.

2. LSC meetings held in 2019-2020

During the reporting period, 10 regular LSC meetings were organised in Moscow. The EU Delegation (EUDEL) chaired all the meetings and they were well attended by the majority of Schengen Member States (as well as by Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Romania). Some Member States did not regularly attend the meetings.

During the reporting period, 4 regular LSC meetings were organised in St-Petersburg. All the meetings were chaired by the EUDEL and well attended by most (as well as by Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania), but not by all Schengen Member States. Some Member States rarely attended the meetings.

¹⁹ April 2019 – December 2020. The report includes the months of 2019 not covered by the previous annual report, as many important developments occurred in that period, such as the launch of the Donbas guidance.

²⁰ The Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Switzerland. Norway is represented through its Moscow consulate.

²¹ The Czech Republic, Germany, and Hungary. Hungary also issues Schengen visas on behalf of 4 other Member States – Austria, Denmark, Slovakia and Slovenia.

During the reporting period, 1 regular LSC meeting was organised in Ekaterinburg. The meeting was chaired by the EUDEL and attended by all three Schengen Member States present in the city (as well as by Bulgaria and Cyprus).

Following the introduction of measures to reduce the risks of COVID-19 contagion, the EUDEL moved all LSC meetings into an online conferencing format open to all Member States' consulates in Russia. In total, 10 such e-LSC meetings took place in the period April-December 2020. Some Member States did not attend regularly, while a few never attended.

EUDEL continued to draw up detailed reports of all LSC meetings and consulted the LSC groups before transmitting the approved reports to the European Commission. Most of the Member States share these reports with their respective capitals, while some drafted their own reports.

Alongside EUDEL's chairing of the three groups, consulates of the Member States in the three LSC locations systematically coordinate their practices with their colleagues in other locations across Russia. The EUDEL shares by email all relevant documents, letters, statistics, policy updates from the European Commission, LSC agendas and LSC reports simultaneously with all Member States' consulates – not only in Moscow, St-Petersburg and Ekaterinburg, but also with consulates present throughout Russia. Sensitive documents are shared with the Member States' embassies in Moscow via a special secured channel. Associated Member States collect the documents from the EUDEL in a sealed envelope.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code and of the Visa Facilitation Agreement

The Schengen Member States and the EUDEL were generally well prepared and adequately staffed to ensure the proper fulfilment of their responsibilities under the former Visa Code, the EU-Russia Visa Facilitation Agreement and the Crimea non-recognition visa guidelines.

However, due to the overall very high volume of applications (until the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced) for several Member States visa staff numbers remain insufficient. Especially during the high season, proper verification of each application can prove impossible. Member States that experienced a strong decrease in the number of applications or received large staff reinforcements, report a significant increase in the number of visa refusals due to more time spent on application verification.

The EU-Russia Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) was deemed as outdated by some Member States, while discussions showed that many Member States have different understanding of how it should be applied leading to very different practices – some more liberal than the agreement had intended, others more restrictive. Either during LSC meetings, or bilaterally, several Member States reported that they regularly stumble onto incorrectly visas issued by other Member States' consulates.

The publication of the Donbas guidance in October 2019 and then the entry into force of the revised Visa Code in February 2020 highlighted again the persistent existence of different interpretations on what are the binding obligations of the Member States, and how much room for manoeuvre exists for them individually when issuing visas.

The COVID-19 restrictions brought an unforeseen and radical change of circumstances at the same time as the LSC groups in Russia had started implementing the revised Visa Code of February 2020. Many outstanding questions on how the Visa Code should interact with the existing VFA had to be resolved on the go. Several Member States were convinced of the primacy of the revised Visa Code over the VFA. Due to the sudden COVID-19 restriction measures, the LSC could experience and assess the implementation of the revised Visa Code for a very short period of less than 2 months.

The main issues relating to visa issuance in the COVID-19 context that had to be resolved were: the recognition of Schengen visas issued before the start of the pandemic, the need or not to accompany valid visas with a consulate note certifying essential travel, and the unimpeded transit of essential categories.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The agreed harmonised list of supporting documents is legally binding and is being adequately implemented in Moscow following the COM Implementing Decision of June 2016. Practical implementation of different elements of the list was on the LSC meeting agendas intermittently during the reporting period. Following the entry into force of the revised Visa Code, most Member States deem necessary the revision of the list, and the LSC will initiate this process in 2021.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

During one year, the LSC discussed the merit and approach for an adapted cascade for Russia. The most discussed issues were the interaction between an adapted Visa Cascade and the VFA, whether first-time applicants and tourists should be included in the cascade, and what a common definition of the correct use of a previous visa should look like. Majorities on all key questions were reached, except on whether first-time applicants should be issued single- or multiple-entry visas. A LSC report to the Visa Committee was submitted in January 2021.

These discussions revealed the very diverse wishes of the Member States when it comes to the treatment of certain categories of applicants, and a very dissimilar understanding of the implications of the revised Visa Code.

d. Harmonisation of practices

During the reporting period, the LSC discussions on the harmonisation of practices were dominated by questions relating to:

- *Visa revocation/annulment* – it appeared that few Member States make use of annexes 30 and 31 due to the cumbersome procedure to transfer them via VISMail. Furthermore, some Member States readily revoke visas issued by other Member States, while others consider that this is the exclusive competence of the Member States that issued the original visa. Finally, Member States have different understanding on what the grounds for revocation can be.
- *Main country of destination* – the non-respect of this rule by applicants, and sometimes by consulates was a major concern for several Member States, and has been deemed as a source of visa shopping.

- *Processing times* – usual processing times for issuing Schengen visas in Russia vary widely (several working days for some or 12/24 hours for others). While such practices do not contradict the Visa Code and the VFA, they go against the spirit of the Visa Code, namely that Member States should be applying harmonised procedures in a given location.
- *Visa fee waiving* – Member States seem to have different practices as some of them waive the visa-fees in only 3% of their issued visas, while other Member States do it on average in 30% of the cases. Differences in the applicants’ profiles do not fully explain this wide difference.
- *Visa fee waivers for disabled persons* – The fees for processing the visa application are not uniformly waived for disabled persons and the person accompanying them. Some Member States apply the visa fee waiver also to applicants with a mild and intermediate disability (II-III categories according to RF classification), while others limit the waiver only to severe cases of disability (I). The VFA does not list categories.
- *EUR 70 visa fee* – Member States continue to apply differently the VFA provisions with some never charging more than EUR 35, while others offer it to applicants as a convenience option.
- *Donbas applicants* – Only half of the Member States’ consulates were consulted by their capitals on the contents of the Donbas guidance, which could have reduced the comprehensiveness of the policy. Several Member States consider the guidance as an orientation document, and hence giving the freedom of how and whether it should be applied at all. Because of this, the LSC could not reach a consensus decision on an updated information notice for applicants.
- *Crimea applicants* – Several Member States refuse to process visa applications from Russian nationals living in Russia that present civil status documents issued by the Crimea branch of the RF Ministry of Justice, or other local illegal authorities. Some Member States deem that by processing visa applications based on such documents, the Schengen consulates are de-facto recognising Crimea as part of Russia. Nevertheless, many other consulates de-facto recognise these civil status documents and agree to issue Schengen visas based on them. Additionally, there have been numerous instances where Member States reported cases where other Member States repeatedly issued Schengen visas to applicants that were clearly still living in Crimea. A large minority of Member States strongly opposes the inclusion of Crimea-related elements in a common information notice for applicants.
- *Crimea non-recognition policy* – Member States repeatedly expressed the need revise the non-recognition guidelines in order to cover the most frequent cases and scenarios when facing Crimean applicants and in order to reach a minimum level of harmonisation of the Member States’ practices. The groups agreed that they lack the necessary guidance and legal basis to deal with applicants living physically and legally in Russia.

e. Exchange of information

Quarterly statistics

The reporting period was very strongly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction in March 2020 of border, travel and visa restrictions, which greatly affected the work of all the Member States' (EU Members States members of the Schengen area and Schengen Associated Countries) consulates.

For at least several weeks in the spring of 2020, the visa issuance was completely halted, and for the majority of 2020 it was limited only to applicants that could qualify as essential travellers. As a result, the number of Schengen visas issued in 2020 will be a fraction of the 2019 numbers, and hence it will reach unprecedented lows. The vast majority of the Schengen visa applications in Russia come traditionally from non-essential travellers. This had an impact on the activity of the external service providers (ESP), but also required the consulates to adopt special sanitary measures and reorganise their internal processes.

Some Member States provide the quarterly statistics with up to 3 months delay, which complicates the timely and comprehensive identification of the local visa trends.

Cases of fraud

Before the travel restrictions entered into force, the Member States had noticed a strong increase in the number of fake supporting documents submitted, especially in the case of travel for tourism purposes. For other purposes, some Member States encountered support letters from Russia's road carriers association (ASMAP) that turned out to be forged. After investigating with the association, it turned out that one of the association employees was providing forged certificates to visa applicants, and subsequently was fired.

Member States expressed the need to organise a visa fraud seminar with the participation of non-EU like-minded countries. Such third countries can provide useful information on applicants or new fraud trends, but Member States are wary to make use of such data due to legal and data protection reasons.

Following the start of the COVID-19 restrictions, consulates registered regular attempts by applicants to present their travel purposes as essential with the help of visa agencies.

Cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)

Many consulates reported issues with obtaining information and confirming the authenticity of bank certificates, especially from Russia's main bank – Sberbank. Some Member States have called for the creation of a compendium with tips and clues on how to analyse and verify each type of supporting document.

Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring

Visa and services fees price transparency for applicants continued to remain an issue, with some ESPs trying to prioritise their VIP services by misleading applicants. Some Member States expressed concern that the growing difference in the service fees amounts is becoming an additional

factor in visa shopping. Following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, most ESPs requested an authorisation for increasing their service fees, to which several Member States consented.

Use of VISMail and VIS

While all Member States agreed to communicate on visa applications via VISMail, several Member States have noticed that some consulates either do not answer or answer with big delays to VISMail messages. It was also revealed that consulates have different approaches when it comes to uploading information in VIS regarding problematic or fraud cases. In addition, Member States' capitals seem to be wary of uploading some criminal cases in SIS and instead prefer to circulate informal 'black lists' among the consulates in Russia.

4. Challenges for 2021

Subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period:

In terms of harmonisation, the LSC will focus in 2021 on revising the harmonised list of supporting documents and agreeing on a common information notice for applicants.

A patchy implementation of the EU visa legislation will continue to lead to a lack of uniform visa issuance and will continue encouraging visa shopping. Several Member States expressed the view that an adapted Visa Cascade will not improve the situation without stricter monitoring, and effective sanctions in case of its non-respect.

Maintaining a uniform policy regarding the visa issuance to non-essential categories of applicants might prove difficult over the mid-term.

The lack of a legal basis and of systems to automatically exchange 'soft alerts' will remain an obstacle in effectively exchanging visa fraud information for first time applicants or for applicants as long as capitals do not insert them in the EU-wide databases.

The uniform application of the Crimea visa and passport non-recognition guidelines will continue to be an issue due to different practices when dealing with Crimean applicants. A tightening of the guidelines, the addition of civil status documents, and making them of binding nature would ensure a harmonisation of the practices.

5. Other issues

The geographical size of the Russian Federation (60 consulates and 350 authorised visa centres across Russia from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok) and the very high number of applications (4,1 million Schengen visas issued in 2019) create unusual conditions and challenges for the local Schengen cooperation. It requires extensive coordination efforts on the side of the Member States' consulates, their back-offices, and the EUDEL.

Furthermore, as the EU's visa policies are matters of high public and political interest in the Russian Federation, regular negative and somewhat distorted reporting in the Russian media and statements by the Russian authorities can make the working conditions of the Schengen consulates and the EUDEL unpredictable and complex.

* * * * *

The Member States consulates and the EU Delegation to the Russian Federation have reviewed this LSC Moscow, St-Petersburg and Ekaterinburg annual report for 2019-2020. It does not necessarily reflect the position of the Member States' capitals or of the European Commission or the European External Action Service.



March 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MOZAMBIQUE 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Of the 11 EU resident Member States Embassies in Maputo, capital of the Republic of Mozambique, 7 of them: **DE, ES, FR, IT, NL, PT, FI** are issuing Schengen visas for a total of 21 Schengen MS. PT has two General Consulates in Maputo and in Beira, both issuing Schengen Visas. NO is no longer issuing Schengen visas in Maputo and France since March 2020 do no longer represents Sweden in visa matters so Schengen Visas for SE are not issued locally anymore.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The COVID-19 crisis' impact most visible on Member States' visa operations was the reduced number of demand /applications due to the unprecedented global travel restrictions.

Some Consulates and consular sessions of MS Embassies had to closed for short period of time due to infections among their staff. The COVID-19 crisis intensified the consular coordination between MS and subsequently increased the number of coordination meetings in 2020. Dedicated agenda items on LSC were dealt with twice during the year. The meetings in the reporting period were well attended. In between meetings, LSC coordination and exchange of information is ensured by e-mail exchanges. The PT Consul in Beira is also invited to the meetings of the LCC/LSC and attends virtually.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The EU Delegation is chairing the LSC since June 2012, working closely with MS and with the full support and cooperation from the European Commission (DG Home). The EU Delegation writes the reports of the meetings and circulate it for comments and approval to the MS.

The LSC fosters exchange of information, coordination and cooperation in carrying-out the tasks foreseen in the Visa Code, including harmonised application of the Visa Code provisions and implementation of the Visa Information System (VIS).

The revised rules in application since 2nd of February 2020 are overall welcomed by MS as perceived as a big simplification. No particular problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code and its revised rules have been reported.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Mozambique LSC harmonised list of documents supporting visa application was adopted by the Commission Implementing Decision of 4/9/2014, and in 15 September 2014 all MS started applying it, as joint agreed starting date. Harmonisation of practice is thus acquired. During the reporting period no amendments were deemed necessary by the LSC.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No issue has been reported.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No particular additional measure of harmonisation of practices is being taken in addition to what is in place.

3.5 Exchange of information

As in the past, exchange of information is encouraged in the LSC, namely on: (i) visa statistics trends, based not only on the yearly official statistics as well as quarterly when possible; (ii) the trends regarding the few instances of migratory risk or visa fraud were discussed in the meetings; (iii) overview of the general VIS functioning; (iv) best practices and relevant experiences. In practical terms room for improvement remains as regards exchange of visas statistics between MS.

There has been a normal use of the new VISA Code and no problems have been observed. The exchange of information is correct. No cases of fraud were reported so far. No problems linked to the implementation of the travel medical insurance (TMI) rules were experienced. EMOSE, Impar and Fidelidade are example of insurance companies used and trusted as adequate TIM.

Cooperation with some private entities, notably banks that certify bank statements in order to demonstrate the means of subsistence of the applicant, is not easy, since, understandably, banks invoke data protection of their clients. The issue of detection of forged/fake documents from banks remains a problem as well as the lack of expertise in this specific area.

As regards the VISMAIL use, all consulates are using it since 20 January 2020 for exchanging personal data of visas applicants, even if for some cases this is managed by Capitals (NL). MS tend to mailing use it when a request raises questions or suspicions, particularly when the applicant, at a given moment, has requested a visa to another Member State outside Mozambique.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

LSC meetings and Consular meetings are now held together to avoid extra-burden of meetings.

4. Challenges

For the year ahead, LSC will continue to strive for early notice and information by the Mozambican authorities on the implementation details of their legislation as regards visa issuing, as well as reinforcing overall internal coordination, including through meetings of the Group with the competent authorities.

5. Other issues

No other issues to address.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO NAMIBIA

10 /03/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Windhoek (Namibia) REPORT

1. Introduction

Five Member States are present and nine are represented by Germany for issuing Schengen Visa in Windhoek. Greece and Cyprus Honorary Consuls are based in Walvis Bay.

12 have Honorary Consuls present in Namibia: 10 in Windhoek, namely Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Sweden; and 2 in Walvis Bay, namely Cyprus and Greece. Norway, Switzerland and Iceland have also appointed Honorary Consuls in Windhoek.

Regarding Schengen issues Germany takes care of Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, France, Greece, Hungary, Luxemburg, Malta, and The Netherlands. Spain issues Schengen visas also for Portugal and Slovenia. Finland issues visas to other Nordic countries and to Estonia, as they are all not present in Namibia. France only issues emergency travel documents (included to Monaco citizens). The German external visa application centre (TLS Group S.A.) was only opened for two weeks after its inauguration in March. Closed due to Covid19, it reopened in October. The travel restrictions affected the number of applications, currently very limited. In 2019, 4.238 applications for Schengen visas were processed, in 2020 only 853.

Germany and Finland had to suspend the Schengen visa representation of other Member States until further notice. Spain suspended the Schengen visa representation with Portugal but later resumed it, and is currently working with both Portugal and Slovenia.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to Covid19 situation in Namibia, in 2020 only one physical LSC meeting took place, on 24 November. The meeting combined the consular coordination with the LSC, and was chaired by the EU Del who also drafted the report. The meeting was well attended, and included an exchange with some Honorary Consuls. However, the group maintained extensive contacts and developed efficient cooperation in the context of repatriation flights, including with the Honorary Consuls.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUD's preparedness to ensure the tasks to be carried out in LSC under the Visa Code:

While the Covid19 circumstances considerably diminished the visa applications' numbers, most MS assess the "unification" of their work under the VISA Code as rather advanced, even if informally.

Due to the COVID-19, no dedicated discussion has been conducted on the specific issues related to implementation of the Visa Code 2020. Nevertheless, the MS declare their readiness to:

- **Prepare a harmonised list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants**
- **Assess the need and modalities for a local adaptation of the general rules regarding the issuing of MEV under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (the "cascade rules").**

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired informally, as all follow the Visa Code. However, the work on a common list has not yet started.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Germany: The MEV mostly depends on the information provided by the applicant. Most of the applicants prove that they are travelling frequently for example for visiting relatives, for business reasons, or if someone is doing transit to a third country on an out- and back basis, or the tourism trip brings them to a third country and on their way back they travel again via the Schengen states.

Spain: issues MEVs under the following conditions: a) For family members of EU citizens; b) If entry from and to the Schengen area is evident from the flight tickets; c) As a general rule, for visas with a validity over 6 months, visas to diplomatic passport holders, or for frequent travellers.

Finland: an applicant has obtained and lawfully used three uniform visas within the previous two years (counted from the date of lodging the fourth application). Provided that the travel document's validity allows for it, a MEV valid for one year shall be issued; an applicant has obtained and lawfully used a previous MEV uniform visa valid for one year within the previous two years (counted from the date of lodging the current application). Provided that the travel document's validity allows for it, a MEV valid for two years shall be issued; an applicant has obtained and lawfully used a previous MEV uniform visa valid for two years within the previous three years (counted from the date of lodging the current application). Provided that the travel document's validity allows for it, a MEV valid for five years shall be issued; business persons; civil servants engaged in regular official contacts with Member States and European Union institutions; representatives of civil society organizations travelling for the purpose of educational training, seminars and conferences; researchers travelling to the Member States for the purpose of carrying out scientific research; athletes following regular training or competitions in (a) Member State(s); artists regularly performing in the Member States frequently; family members of EU and Swiss citizens and family members of third-country nationals legally residing in Member States.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Informal unification is quite advanced. Namibia is not a complex country for visas ("little" fraud and forgery compared to other places), so the pressure for more unification of criteria is not there. It should be also noted that 2020 saw little activity in Schengen visas or in LSC meetings. There is room for further unification and harmonisation, including discussions on a common checklist for supporting documents.

3.4 Exchange of information

Monthly statistics exchanged, including on fraud attempts, satisfactory quality; low level of activity in 2020.

Given little irregular migration pressure, there is no need so far for greater exchange of info. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to add an AOB in the visa statistics for non-ordinary issues.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

4. Challenges

5. Other issues

This report has been approved by the Member States participating in the Local Schengen Cooperation in Windhoek (Germany, Finland, and Spain).



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION IN PERU

5 February 2020

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN PERU 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

In Peru, 26 Member States have consulates or honorary consulates in Lima (the capital) and other cities (Cusco, Arequipa, Callao, Iquitos, Bagua, Chiclayo, Ica, Piura, Puerto Maldonado, Trujillo and Tacna) and 15 have embassies in Lima.

Some Member States have ad hoc cooperation agreements allowing one Member State to issue visas on behalf of another:

- Germany represents Lithuania;
- Austria represents Malta and Slovenia;
- Belgium represents Luxembourg;
- Spain represents Slovakia;
- Finland represents Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Norway and Sweden;
- Greece represents Cyprus.

Peru began issuing biometric passports on 25 February 2016 and ceased production of conventional/non-biometric passports on 31 July 2016. The older passports will remain valid until their expiry, allowing entry into the Schengen area.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The EU-Peru reciprocal short-stay visa waiver agreement entered into force in March 2016. As a result, the Heads of EU Missions decided that LSC-specific meetings would no longer take place from the second half of 2016 onwards. If and when necessary, Schengen-related issues would be dealt with in the EU Consular Group meetings as a separate item on the agenda. While Peruvian citizens no longer require a visa to enter the Schengen area, there are foreigners living in Peru who still require a Schengen visa.

In 2020, five consular meetings (four virtual) were held under the different EU presidencies (Finland and Germany, since Croatia does not have an embassy in Lima). These were organised with assistance from the EU Delegation in Peru, and Schengen issues could be discussed at these meetings if necessary. The meetings were very well attended, with representatives from around 90% of the 15 Member States present in Peru. The EU Delegation prepared the reports. The LSC group exchanges information by email, and especially through the WhatsApp group. There were no ad hoc LSC group meetings in 2020, nor were there any meetings outside Lima. The EU and the Schengen states were the only participants in the meetings.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on the Member States' visa operations and on LSC coordination because Peru was under a strict lockdown from 16 March to 30 June 2020 and the health situation did not return to normal at any point that year. This seriously affected international connections and travel between Peru and Europe; Lima airport was closed until November 2020 and European citizens were banned from entering Peru, while Peruvian citizens were banned from entering the Schengen area. The situation also had a significant impact on the consulates in Lima and the officials working there; many of them had to suspend appointments and work remotely, or only provide in-person assistance in urgent cases. Because of this, there was a significant drop in consular activity throughout 2020.

3. Current situation

a. Application of the Visa Code

Most of the Member States consider the 'unification' of their work under the Visa Code to be advanced, although there are some elements that still require fine-tuning:

- full, commonly applied use of the visa application form in accordance with the Visa Code as amended;
- discrepancies as regards the requirements on submitting visa applications in person for applicants who have been issued visas in the past (the issues relate more specifically to the collection of fingerprints);
- discrepancies as regards the requirement to have certain documents translated from Spanish into the official language of the country of destination.

Specific problems linked to the implementation of the Visa Code, concentrating on the revised rules applicable from February 2020:

As a result of COVID-19 and other consular needs, there was no specific discussion focusing on this point. However, the Member States reported that they had implemented the requirement for each visa section to adopt organisational measures to ensure that visa-related complaints are submitted, documented and handled in the manner required by the Visa Code.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the list of supporting documents

The Commission Implementing Decision on the Harmonised List was adopted in 2019. The LSC group was notified that the approved list was mandatory and had to be published on the embassies' websites. The list of documents used to prove the purpose and conditions of a planned stay has not been harmonised. In theory, the use of harmonised documents should continue. However, for obvious reasons, activities in 2020 focused on other matters than strict compliance with use of the list.

c. Adaptation of general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas to applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('cascades')

Very few multiple-entry visas were issued in Peru due to the pandemic (and the fact that borders were closed for several months).

d. Harmonisation of practices

As new safety measures and various national restrictions relating to COVID-19 were introduced, individual cases were observed of applications that sought to evade the rules in force in some countries. All the Member States see the added value of keeping one another informed about the risks of visa shopping, especially in view of the different application processing rules in the specific context of the pandemic.

4. Exchange of information

In 2020, the pandemic and the consular crisis resulted in the group making more regular use of the WhatsApp group. Information transfer and coordination between the consuls became more consistent and regular as a result. Given the specific situation in 2020, the group mainly concentrated on exchanging information about crisis-related practices, ongoing border closures and new rules and other labour constraints. As a result of the pandemic and the restrictions on entering the Schengen area, some of the consulates in Peru have been tasked with assessing the ‘essential’ nature of short trips by Peruvians to the Schengen area (e.g. mixed couples, medical appointments).

As a result of COVID-19, the consuls’ focus on repatriation flights and the lengthy interruption of visa services, statistics were not compiled regularly over the course of the year. Since so few visas were issued in 2020, the issue of visas was not discussed in depth. More work on statistics is likely to be done in 2021 if the Member States so require.

No cases of fraud were reported to the EU Delegation, nor were any raised in a broad LSC forum; this is probably due to the very low level of visa activity in 2020, the extraordinary border controls and the limited opportunities for travel. Some direct exchanges may have taken place between individual Member States.

5. Challenges

1. Describe the response to challenges, if any, listed in the 2018-2019 report.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the work of the consulates in Peru far more difficult. The consulates have had to overcome these challenges by flexibly adapting to the situation, drawing on their colleagues’ good practices.

Over the course of the year, the group took special care to keep members abreast of all the rules applying to travel and transit between the EU and Peru. Up-to-date contact information and contact lists were distributed to that end, and established email lists and WhatsApp groups [were] regularly used for informal contact and quick consultations.

The EU Delegation’s regular reports on the COVID-19 situation are shared with the group members every two weeks.

2. Describe subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021).

The main challenge for 2020 [sic] is still to do with the COVID-19 crisis, the return to a more ‘normal’ situation after the pandemic and the future reopening of the Schengen area to third-country nationals.

If the ETIAS (European Travel Information and Authorisation System) enters into force, special care will have to be taken to publish information about the new system for entering the Schengen area on consular and embassy websites and share information with the Peruvian authorities (Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Migration Office).

6. Other

All the embassies/consulates involved in Local Schengen Cooperation have approved this report.



EUROPEAN UNION DELEGATION
TO THE PHILIPPINES

15 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in THE PHILIPPINES 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

15 Schengen member States (BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, HU, ES, FR, FI, EL, IT, NL, NO, PL, SE, and AT) are represented in the Philippines.

The current representation arrangements on visa matters are as follows:

BE represents Luxembourg and Slovenia (agreements suspended but essential travel applications will be processed; CZ represents Slovakia.; DK represents Estonia; EL represents Portugal; NL represents Latvia; NO represents Iceland (pre-COVID) from Bangkok; AT represents Lithuania.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

There were four meetings in 2020: 29 January, 16 July, 1 October and 10 December. Meetings are chaired by the EUDEL and are in general well attended. Virtual format since March allowed many non-represented or present States to join the meetings.

The COVID-19 crisis had an important impact on Member States' visa operations as States did not allow tourist and business travel. In addition, metro Manila had a long lock down and domestic travel only resumed at a very slow pace in September/October. Consular activities were affected by the lack of local staff and the difficulties of transportation. Some States suffered COVID-19 cases among consuls or local staff forcing closure of consulates during the required quarantine (14 days). At the end of 2020 consular activities have resumed at 50-60% capacity and with the required health protocols.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

The Schengen Visa Code is followed by all Schengen Members States in the Philippines. A large number of Schengen visas are granted to Filipino seafarers.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

2020 has been focused on the revision of the lists of supporting documents dating from 2016. After two discussions in the Visa Committee, the LSC could not agree on two issues: The number of months of financial statements required and the travel History of the applicants and their sponsors/hosts.

The Visa Committee should examine the list early 2021.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The local adaptations or 'cascades' were discussed in July following the receipt of a template for adaptation to local circumstances. MS expressed no need to create a specific cascade for seafarers. NL applied the blue carpet system whereby MEV with longer validity were awarded if there was a national element. DK had a similar scheme called red carpet. BE had also reviewed its practice providing a more generous system wherever a BE company was involved and depending of the quality of the agency in the Philippines. BE had just reviewed its visa issuance for seafarers based on the comments from Brussels EU and the new visa code.

The LSC concluded that there was no need for a local cascade. Existing arrangements were satisfactory for MS.

d. Harmonisation of practices

In January, there was a discussion to harmonise the **visa fees in PHP** but the discussion was inconclusive as many States received exchange reference rates from their capitals, some annually (HU) and on a regular basis (CH), some others monthly (NL, AT, and FR) or on regular basis (BE). NO charged the fee in Euro.

e. Exchange of information

BE is in charge of checking the fulfilment of the requirements of the TMI companies. In July, the LSC agreed on a list of 28 TMI companies proposed was agreed and MS were invited to publish it in their websites.

4. Challenges

In the 2018-2019 report, the harmonization of procedures on visa issuance for seafarers in the Philippines was mentioned as a challenge. In 2020, despite of some divergent procedures on this issue, this is not a major issue and Member States have found a "modus vivendi".

For 2021, the main challenge will be to agree on a harmonised list of documents and its implementation when agreed by the VISA Committee.



31 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Rwanda 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Five Member States (BE, DE, FR, NL, SE) and one Associated Schengen State (CH) are present in Rwanda.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

EU Delegation and Member/Associated States in Rwanda started their Local Schengen cooperation meetings, chaired by EUD, in August 2020 and held one meeting, attended by only three delegations (due to rotation of MS consuls). The report was duly drawn up by the EUD and submitted to HQ.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

There are few actors involved in delivering C-visas in Rwanda. Before the covid-19 pandemic, only BE issued Schengen visas in Rwanda, on behalf of all but five Member/Associated States. In addition, DE issued C-visas for third country nationals.

During the Covid-19 crisis, Belgium suspended all its representation agreements. Since September, Belgium is again representing the countries which expressly requested it. At this point in time, BE issues in representation visa for ES, FR, MT, NL, SE, SI and CH. For some other countries, BE issues visas on request from the competent embassy. During the pandemic, the German Embassy started to issue all C-visas in Rwanda. The FR and NL Embassies issued some ad hoc C-visas, as BE Embassy was not allowed to issue visas for a prolonged period. Swedish and Swiss Embassies in Kigali do not issue any visas.

EU and MS in Rwanda are well prepared to ensure the execution of tasks as per the Visa Code, and there were no issues in implementing the new Visa Code.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already accomplished. There is no need for an amendment at this time.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas of the Visa Code are applied among the two Embassies concerned.

d. Harmonisation of practices

There have been no further initiatives on the harmonisation of practices.

e. Exchange of information

The LSC has only started work in August 2020. Member States have exchanged on the number of visa applications and the number of visa issued. In 2020, MS processed and issued the following number of C-visas: BE 1619 (2021 applications), DE 68, FR 7 and NL 7.

Before the LSC start, the group had exchanged on cases of fraud, cooperation with banks, VISMail and external service providers.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

p.m.

4. Challenges

EU and MS will observe the trend regarding delivery of visas, as well as visa applications after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. We will seek to establish a regular cooperation of the authorities with the group to be able to clarify relevant issues for visa and consular matters.

5. Other issues

p.m.

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in the Republic of Korea (RoK) 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

22 EU Member States (EU MS) out of 27 are present in the Republic of Korea (RoK). Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia cover the RoK from their embassies located in Beijing or Tokyo.

The agreements of representation in Schengen visa matters²² were as follows: Austria represents Malta; Belgium represents Luxembourg; Italy represents Slovenia; Poland represents Estonia; Slovakia represents Latvia; Sweden deals with the visa requests that are addressed to Denmark, Iceland and Norway, as part of the agreement of cooperation of the Nordic Council; Switzerland represents Liechtenstein.

Overall, 10 228 EU citizens (plus citizens of Norway and Switzerland) were registered and represented locally as of September 2020 in the RoK²³. Like elsewhere, it is difficult to assess the exact number of expatriates in the RoK based on EU MS Embassies' statistics as consular registration is generally not mandatory.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

From January to December 2020, four EU/LSC Consular cooperation group meetings were held on 5 February, 25 February, 21 July and 14 December. Minutes were circulated on behalf of the chair after each meeting.

During the reported period, EU MS/Schengen local consular group meetings were chaired by the local chair as represented by the rotating Presidency. Croatia exercised the local chair until the end of June 2020, followed by Germany in the second semester of 2020. The EU Delegation supported the chair with logistics, providing a meeting room at the EU Delegation, drafting minutes, etc.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis in February, when the local situation was rapidly developing, the Ambassador of the Embassy of Croatia (chairing) and the EU Head of Delegation were present at the EU/LSC Consular cooperation group meetings which also discussed crisis management coordination.

Practically all EU MS participated in the meetings. Switzerland and Norway also attended the LSC meetings regularly (Iceland and Liechtenstein do not have diplomatic representation in the RoK).

Due to the impact of COVID-19, at the start of the outbreak in spring 2020, a number of Member State embassies temporarily suspended visa sections. Visa operations are now generally available again, however the total amount of people travelling to Europe has decreased substantially. For instance, one Member State embassy reported that the total amount of visa requests in 2020 was

²² This does not necessarily imply the same arrangements for consular matters more widely.

²³ Latest available data of the Korea Immigration Service (KIS).

less than half of the 2019 figure and that the number of short stay visas only reached 10% of the 2019 figure.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

The main issue dealt with by the consular cooperation and LSC group in 2020 related to the COVID-19 crisis and especially the visa measures imposed by the RoK since April 2020. In particular, the RoK suspended visa waiver agreements with nearly all EU Member States in April as a public health measure and also in response to the original EU ban on non-essential travel. For the time being these restrictions remain in place and RoK authorities are not able to indicate when they will lift these visa measures, despite repeated meetings and requests. They argue that the measures are “temporary” and that they will be reviewed as the global COVID-19 situation evolves. Discussions among members of the LSC group indicate that authorities are using such visa measures to limit the flow of foreigners travelling to the RoK, which is reflected in quite narrow visa issuance practices by Korean missions abroad. During 2020 the LSC group exchanged and coordinated on this issue, which was also repeatedly discussed in other EU coordination meetings including at the level of Heads of Mission.

On the same topic, it should also be noted that on 8 October the Commission published in the EU Official Journal information about notifications received from Germany concerning cases of visa non-reciprocity with the RoK and Japan. This publication marked the official activation of the visa reciprocity mechanism (“Article 7 procedure”). The issue was also discussed by Member States in the Council Visa Working Party.

As no visas are required for RoK citizens travelling to the EU/Schengen area, LSC discussions on the application of the EU Visa Code²⁴ have been relatively limited and discussed only when problematical cases were brought up by EU MS/Schengen countries.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of supporting documents for the RoK was adopted by Commission Decision on 24 October 2018²⁵, following discussion and agreement by the LSC. MS embassies in 2020 did not raise a need to update the agreed list. The Delegation was not made aware of significant issues regarding implementation.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (‘MEV cascades’)

Member State embassies did not provide comments or raise any major issues on this issue.

d. Harmonisation of practices

The LSC exchanged information on the authenticity features of ID documents used by foreigners in the RoK and how to assess the validity of such documents, following past cases noted by several

²⁴ See <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/visa-code-consolidated-version.pdf>

²⁵ See https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/c_2018_6863_fl_commission_implementing_decision_en_v6_p1_994111.pdf and https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/c_2018_6863_fl_annex_en_v9_p1_994112.pdf

embassies where suspicious documents were used in visa applications by foreigners originating principally from a number of South Asian countries.

e. Exchange of information

Meetings of the group were appreciated as a good platform to exchange information related to consular and visa issues. Exchange of information focused in particular on issues arising due to the COVID-19 situation, including RoK visa measures as well as the RoK's introduction of a system of re-entry permits for foreign residents travelling abroad and returning. The chair and other Member States regularly debriefed on meetings with RoK authorities on travel and visa restrictions. Discussions also covered more specific topics such as the RoK approach to seafarers' mobility (and visa measures for this category) and the RoK's development of a revised system for points-based visas.

Discussions also included a general exchange of experience in dealing with Korean authorities such as the lack of official reaction from MoFA if approached by a Note Verbale. Electronic exchanges via e-mail and through a dedicated WhatsApp group were also appreciated by the LSC, in particular during the rapidly changing situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exchanges on similar topics were also regularly conducted in EU Heads of Mission meetings.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

Started process of updating the Joint EU Consular Crisis Preparedness Plan, which should be finalised in the next months.

4. Challenges

A key challenge in 2021 will involve the RoK visa measures described in section 3.1, particularly restoring reciprocity between Europe and the RoK in this regard. Sustained pressure, including at the political level and through the visa reciprocity mechanism, will be necessary to re-establish visa-free travel for EU/Schengen citizens to the RoK.

Other challenges may be related to continued COVID-related constraints, depending on how the pandemic situation will develop in the RoK and globally.

5. Other issues

This report has been cleared with the local EU/Schengen Consular group.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
TO THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

الاتحاد الأوروبي

مندوبية الاتحاد الأوروبي إلى
المملكة العربية السعودية

Riyadh, 10/3/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Saudi Arabia REPORT

1. Introduction

A total of 18 Schengen Member States²⁶ (MS) are represented in Riyadh. Four of them²⁷ also have consulates in Jeddah. The majority²⁸ of Schengen member states are making use of an external service provider (ESP) to collect and process visa applications. This is currently the case for Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. All the countries use the services of VFS Global with the exception of ES, which uses BLS International. The majority of these LSC MS use the company's visa application centres in Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-Khobar; a few others use the company's visa application centre only in Riyadh.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

LSC group met regularly either physically at the EUD or online (webex meetings) due to Covid-19 restrictions. The meetings were chaired by the EUD. In the reporting period, a total of six meetings took place. LSC meetings are open to all EUMS as observers; Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania occasionally attended.

Meetings were always well attended with usually 15-16 MS present; none of the MS was regularly absent.

Following a practice introduced already in March 2017, a political officer from the EUD chaired the local MS LSC / Consular affairs coordination group meetings. LSC continued to hold its meetings back-to-back with Consular Cooperation meetings.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

On the 2/2/2020 the LSC MS introduced, in practice, the new Visa Code. However, due to the travel restrictions imposed both by LSC countries as well as the local authorities (which had suspended all regular air travels from mid-March to mid-September), the implementation of the new Visa Code has not been heavily tested. Nevertheless, the LSC MS have already agreed that the new Visa Code is unnecessarily restrictive to KSA travellers and contrary to its initial purpose, it adds administrative burden on consulates. Therefore, they have proposed the adoption of a more generous 'local cascade' (see relevant section below).

²⁶ AT, BE, CZ, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, MT, NL, PL, PT, ES, SE, CH, NO

²⁷ FR, DE, EL, IT

²⁸ Only PL is not making use of an ESP

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In October 2018, the Visa Committee adopted the new harmonised list of supporting documents to be presented by visa applicants in Saudi Arabia, after three rounds of examination of the draft presented by the LSC. The new harmonised list of supporting documents replaced the previous harmonised list which dated back to September 2011.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades').

Following the implementation of the new Visa Code, LSC MS suggested a more generous local cascade, which should be applied only to KSA citizens and holders of permanent residency status (not temporary residency status renewed with the Iqama cards); KSA nationals represent no migratory risk for Schengen states and they have not been a source of concerns for any other visa related matters. Rejection of visa applications for KSA nationals have been, in the recent years, rare. Equally, the permanent residency status is granted to a minimal number of non-KSA nationals which acquire their status either through investments or due to their exceptional talents and skills. Thus, they seem to match the same criteria as the one met by KSA nationals. Contrary to these two categories, rejection rates are commonly related to applications by expat workers mostly from the MENA region, Asia and Africa, for which the Visa Code cascade will be applied, especially since the "Saudisation" process of the local job market has created instability and unpredictability to job security for non-Saudis.

General practice by Consulates of EU/ Schengen MS prior to the introduction of the new visa code had been more generous than the regular Visa Code cascade and it is expected that its implementation (as globally suggested) will create unnecessary administrative burden on consulates, contrary to the aims of the new visa code.

Furthermore, given the constant request of the KSA leadership for the country to be included in the Annex II list of the EU Regulation 2018/1806 (List of third countries whose nationals are exempt from the requirement to be in possession of a visa when crossing the external borders of the member states), MS agreed that a less generous cascade than the prevailing system until 02/02/2020, will send unintended and counter-productive messages, creating political frustration to the detriment of bilateral relations.

In addition, KSA appears to be one of the most lucrative markets for tourism purposes for all MS; therefore they wish to encourage and facilitate, rather than impede, larger numbers of Saudi visitors.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Following the new harmonised list entered into force, LSC MS discuss and adopt practices to ensure a harmonised application of the new list and the need to keep its elements publicly available. LSC reviewed and ensured the correct implementation of the new harmonised list, including the consulates in Jeddah.

In the context of the regular challenges met by LSC MS in their relations with the External Service Providers, LSC MS have carried out inspection visits to the Riyadh visa Centers to ensure harmonisation of practices as well as to verify the implementation of the Covid-19 related measures imposed by the local authorities on social distancing.

3.5 Exchange of information

LSC MS regularly discussed the prospects of reopening the visa application process for non-essential travels, which was suspended in early 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By the end of 2020 the regular visa application processes were not reinstated.

LSC MS regularly discussed the situation of Yemeni visa applicants, in view of the guarantees given by a number of EU governments to refugees arriving on their territories.

MS regularly discussed their experience with the External Service Provider and exchanged best practice as to the enforcement of legal and contractual obligations.

MS circulated amongst each other cases of suspected fraud bilaterally or by means of the LSC mailing list.

LSC MS regularly inform their consulates in Jeddah of the outcomes of the LSC meetings.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

EUD and EU MS decided, in the context of Brexit and the new Visa Code, to consider the redesigning, printing and distribution of the Common Information Sheet (article 48 (2) Visa Code) in English and Arabic.

LSC MS have regularly updated information on exceptional visa processing and local regulations and conditions in home countries for entering / exiting the EU / Schengen area, since the early stages of the pandemic. EUD was collecting and distributing all the relevant information.

4. Challenges

The greatest challenge for the LSC MS will be the resumption of the non-essential travels, since the external service provider and/or the Consulates have suspended temporarily their cooperation with contract agents. As a result, it will require an advance warning for the proper and simultaneous resumption of the regular visa procedures, which is further impeded by the overall unpredictability caused by the global pandemic.

During the next reporting period the EUD and EU MS Embassies will also need to continue the follow up on the correct implementation of the new harmonised list and the new Visa Code.

Moreover, the ESP centres should be closely monitored with regards to the conveying of the message that all Schengen countries should receive a united, uniform approach from all ESP centres throughout KSA.

5. Other issues

During the reporting period the LSC MS commended Saudi authorities for their efforts to improve the procedures for visa applications from Schengen citizens. However, most of the LSC MS still expressed dissatisfaction in that they were issuing visas rather generously to Saudi applicants but with blatant absence of any reciprocity in visa relations between EU/Schengen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

For the first time since 2011, the third meeting of the joint Schengen-KSA technical working group on visa was held. On 25/11, EUDEL Riyadh and EU Schengen Consuls met H.E. Tamim Al Dosari, Head of the Consular Affairs Department at MoFA to address formally visa related issues. The group will follow up on the outcomes of the meeting.

This report was discussed and revised at the LSC meeting held on 4th of March; it was endorsed by LSC MS through a silence procedure on 10th of March 2021.



UNION EUROPEENNE
Délégation en République du Sénégal

Dakar, le 11 mars 2020

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS DES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) AU SENEGAL RAPPORT 2020

1. Introduction

Au Sénégal 13 Etats membres Schengen sont représentés: Allemagne, Autriche, Belgique, Espagne, France, Grèce, Italie, Luxembourg, Pays-Bas, Pologne, Portugal, Roumanie, la République Tchèque et la Suisse.

12 consulats (Allemagne, Autriche, Belgique, Espagne, France, Italie, Pays-Bas, Pologne, Portugal, République Tchèque, Roumanie, Suisse) délivrent des visas aux ressortissants du Sénégal et des pays qui se trouvent sous leur juridiction respective. Les visas pour le Luxembourg sont délivrés par la Belgique. La plupart des Ambassades des Etats membres au Sénégal sont accrédités pour plusieurs pays de la région, pour certaines jusqu'à 9 pays.

Concernant les Etats Membres non-représentés à Dakar, 8 Etats Membres disposent des accords pour la délivrance des visas avec 3 EM représentés (l'Estonie, la Finlande et Slovaquie avec la France; la Grèce, la Hongrie, Malte avec l'Autriche, la Suède et la Slovaquie avec les Pays-Bas). La Suisse représente la Lettonie. La Grèce va ouvrir une Ambassade avec service consulaire à Dakar en 2021.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2020

A partir de mars 2020 le travail des consulats des Etats membres, y compris les opérations de visas, se sont vues fortement impactées par la crise Covid : réduction importante du nombre de visas, pour la plupart des visas longue durée et pour des cas exceptionnels ; gestion de situations spécifiques résultat des conditions sanitaires et la limitation de mouvements ; adaptation des procédures pour mettre en place des mesures préventives. La coordination CLS s'est adaptée aux moyens virtuelles, avec des réunions en Webex et la maintenance des échanges par mail.

Les réunions de coordination, présidées par la Délégation de l'Union européenne, au niveau de Cheffe de la Section Politique, sont tenues régulièrement. Durant la période couverte par le rapport, quatre réunions de coordination Schengen se sont tenues : 2 réunions standard, en janvier et novembre ; et 2 réunions ad hoc, en mars (analyse des statistiques visas, partage d'information sur VIS mail, premier échange sur mesures adoptées par les consulats en raison de l'épidémie Covid) et juin (consultation sur la reprise des opérations de visas).

Lors des réunions de coordination, les statistiques de visas sont partagées et analysées, des informations sur les cas de fraude documentaire et des filières d'immigration clandestine pour le Sénégal et les pays de la région: Gambie, Guinée, Guinée Bissau, Cap Vert etc. discutés. En 2020

les réunions se sont concentrées sur les enjeux de fonctionnement des consulats face au Covid, et l'impact sur la délivrance (nombre et type) de visas. Des discussions se sont organisées pour partager des informations sur VIS mail et échanger des informations sur l'application locale du Code de Visas ; le NL a présenté son nouveau système de traitement de dossiers de visas, basé sur la centralisation à la Haye de l'analyse des données et la digitalisation des dossiers.

Une très bonne participation des Etats membres Schengen a été notée lors de toutes les réunions mentionnées. Les comptes rendus des réunions sont préparés par la Délégation de l'UE, qui établit également l'ordre du jour, incluant les contributions des Etats membres. Entre les réunions, la circulation de l'information est régulière grâce à une liste de diffusion constituée à cet effet. Plusieurs Etats membres prennent l'initiative de soumettre une question ou partager une information avec les autres EM. La Délégation de l'UE partage régulièrement les informations sur les initiatives prises à Bruxelles dans le domaine de la politique européenne des visas.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

Les Etats membres appliquent le code des visas. L'Espagne, la France, l'Italie, les Pays-Bas et le Portugal ont externalisé la réception des demandes de visas (société VFS Global pour la France, l'Italie, les Pays-Bas, le Portugal et la Belgique –depuis septembre 2018–, et la société BLS pour l'Espagne).

En raison des mesures prises suite à la crise Covid, le nombre de visas est fortement descendu. Les informations disponibles indiquent de réductions des demandes pour tous les pays, de plus de 50% dans la plupart de cas (IT -50% ; FR -67%), et même plus de 80% dans certains cas (PO -80%, CZ -87%). Le pays qui en 2020 a reçu le plus nombre de demandes de visas est la France, suivi de l'Italie. Le taux de refus reste élevé, autour du 50% de moyenne, avec des pays avec des taux importants (PO 88%, AT 68%). Le taux le plus faible de refus en 2020 a été celui de l'Italie (25%).

Depuis son entrée en vigueur, les EMs ont commencé à appliquer le **Code de Visas révisée** comme prévu, sans difficultés majeurs. En ce qui concerne les VEM, les EMs ont donné leur accord de principe sur la convenance d'harmoniser les pratiques au niveau local et l'utilité du système en cascade, d'ailleurs appliqué couramment. Par contre, il n'y a pas un accord unanime localement pour l'adoption d'un système en cascade uniforme et fixe, qui limiterait la marge de décision local de chaque consulat. Les différences entre les différents profils des demandeurs de visas, notamment entre la FR et d'autres EMs, rendraient difficile aussi l'accord sur des critères à appliquer de façon homogène. En ce qui concerne l'octroi des visas de moins de 5 ans, elles sont courantes en raison de la validité des passeports sénégalais (5 ans).

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs.

Les pratiques concernant les documents justificatifs devant être fournis par les demandeurs de visas ont discutées et échangées lors des réunions de coordination. Après discussion au Comité Visa le 22 janvier 2019, qui a donné son avis positif au projet discuté localement par le Groupe CLS, la liste harmonisée de documents a été adoptée le 6 mai 2019. Pas de difficultés dans son application ; la prochaine réunion de coordination CLS inclura un point d'échanges sur son application locale, et le possible besoin de réviser la liste existante.

3.3 Adaptation des règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

(Voir 3.1.)

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

La plupart des EMs utilisent le **système de communication VIS Mail**, sauf exceptions. PT et NL confirment que dans leur cas la transmission d'information se fait au niveau des capitales. La BE décrit leur système de partage d'information qui permet des échanges, mais qui ne permet aucun fichage de fichier avec des données privée (en raison du RGPD).

Le contexte COVID a requis la mise en œuvre des **dispositions sanitaires préventives** dans les services consulaires, dont la discussion au sein des réunions CLS a encouragé leur harmonisation: mise à dispositions de gels désinfectants pour les mains; achats de masques; diffusion de messages à l'interne sur les bonnes pratiques d'hygiène; nettoyage plus régulier des endroits à risques ; quarantaine des documents.

3.5 Echange d'informations

Conformément aux dispositions du code des visas, les réunions de coordination et la liste de diffusion servent à échanger les informations notamment sur les aspects suivants:

- La mise à jour des statistiques sur le nombre de demandes des visas et les taux de refus et les principales raisons de ces refus.
- Les cas de fraude documentaire (falsification des documents de voyage, manque de fiabilité d'actes d'état civil, utilisation de plusieurs identités et des passeports par la même personne, abus d'utilisation des passeports diplomatiques etc.)
- Les cas de fraude dans l'utilisation de visas et d'identification de falsification de visas.
- Les filières d'immigration clandestine (demandes de groupes avec faux buts de voyage: religieux, sportif, culturel, etc).
- Le partage d'expériences sur la vérification d'authenticité des documents délivrés par les autorités du Sénégal et les pays sous la juridiction des Consulats basés au Sénégal.
- La viabilité des sociétés d'assurance de voyage.

3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Système de compilation et partage des statistiques des visas: il a été convenu au sein de la Coordination Locale Schengen au Sénégal de maintenir le système de compilation et partage des statistiques des visas assurés par les EMs par ordre alphabétique à tour de rôle de six mois.

Partage d'information des cas de fraude documentaire et documents d'état civil non fiables: la fraude documentaire et la non-fiabilité des documents d'état civil au Sénégal et dans d'autres pays de la région (Guinée, Guinée Bissau, Gambie) a été identifié comme un problème majeur. Les Etats membres partagent l'information disponible régulièrement et se sont accordés sur l'importance de renforcer cette pratique.

Le LSC s'est réuni en juin pour répondre conjointement à la consultation sur la reprise des opérations visas au Sénégal. Suite à la fermeture des frontières et à la situation épidémique, persistant au Sénégal pendant 2020, cette reprise n'était pas possible pour les visas Schengen. Les consulats ont ouvert leurs services visas ; le traitement et délivrance de visas, notamment de visas nationales et des cas exceptionnelles ont repris, avec des fortes limitations.

4. Défis

La fraude documentaire continue à constituer un défi important au Sénégal et dans d'autres pays de la région dans lesquels les Etats membres basés à Dakar sont accrédités, notamment la Guinée. Des cas de fraude et fraude documentaire sont reportés par rapport aux applications de visas de toute sorte, court et longue durée (tourisme et affaires, accompagnants, conférences et groupes culturelles, visites familiales, réunification, etc.). Des documents faux ou contenant de fausse information sont reportés: documents justificatifs, lettres d'invitation, et documents de voyage, y compris des passeports diplomatiques.

Ces pays se situent parmi les principaux pays d'origine de migration irrégulière en Europe. De véritables réseaux, de plus en plus professionnels, spécialisés en production ou légalisation de (faux) documents d'état civil se sont développés dans la région.

La non-fiabilité des documents d'état civil au Sénégal et dans certains autres pays de la région (Guinée, Guinée Bissau, Gambie) continue à être un défi. Pour le Sénégal sont en premier lieu concernés la zone frontalière avec la Mauritanie et les communes précaires de Dakar. Le cas spécifique des documents faux et fraudes liées à l'état civil des documents provenant de la Guinée est souligné.

L'adaptation aux mesures préventives nécessaires dans le contexte Covid sont un défi additionnel pour l'organisation du travail aux consulats, ainsi que la gestion des cas exceptionnels, et les difficultés liées à la fermeture de frontières.

5. Divers

Ce rapport a été préparé par la Délégation de l'UE au Sénégal et partagé avec les Etats membres de l'Espace Schengen. Il a été approuvé le 24 mars 2020.



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Political Section

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN SERBIA 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Twenty Member States have an embassy in Belgrade, with Ireland covered from their embassy in Athens. Schengen countries Norway and Switzerland are present in Belgrade as well. In addition, Romania (in Zajecar and Vrsac), Hungary (in Subotica) and Bulgaria (in Nis) have consulates outside the capital.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Due to the Covid pandemic, no physical LSC meeting was held in 2020. Exchange and communication was mostly facilitated via a Viber Group for Consuls in Belgrade, which served well to overcome operational issues. At the end of the year, to clarify open questions for the Annual Report, a Webex meeting was held on 18 December, chaired by the EMLO Andreas Nagy. At this meeting, 15 Member States participated (AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, ES, EL, FR, HU, RO, PT, SI, SK, SW).

Most embassies continued visa operation as usual, yet all introduced access restrictions and precautionary measures.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

None of the participants raised any application issues, beside one request to discuss Art. 24 (2), which was handled accordingly.

b. List of supporting documents

EUD questioned application and usefulness of the existing list. None of the participants raised the need to amend it.

c. Adaption of the rules under Art. 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Regarding the adaption of the general rules under Article 24 (2) of the Visa Code, the LSC discussed the approach taken by the present MS. Most embassies follow the suggested pattern, yet in some cases a different modus operandi is followed (skipping steps under specific circumstances).

Such cases are quite common, as applicants applying in Serbia are often Middle Eastern or Turkish citizens with a positive history of short term visas and residence permits in Serbia.

d. Exchange of information

Visa statistics are occasionally forwarded to EUD and collected. Information exchange is organised in an EU Consular Group on Viber, where any ad hoc questions are handled and discussed. Patterns of fraudulent applications were discussed both there as well as in the LSC Webex meeting, e.g. in relation to fraudulent language certificates. In general, the level of cooperation and information exchange, both within the overall community as well as bilaterally, is excellent. This goes also for the cooperation with local authorities, who are generally both responsive and supportive. The use of VISMail, due to the lesser amount of visa applications, remained rather the exception, yet when applied, the system worked well.

e. Other initiatives taken by LSC

With many locals receiving or visiting relatives in member states, the various travel restrictions made a timely exchange on transit regulations necessary. For more than half a year, EUD compiled a list of travel restrictions/regulations imposed by EU MS and shared with the LSC community. The exercise was stopped in December.

4. Challenges

None outside the general limitations following Covid 19 restrictions.



EUROPEAN UNION

Delegation to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Republic of Maldives

Colombo, 26 January 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) IN SRI LANKA AND THE MALDIVES 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

Five member states (MS) are present in Colombo, out of which one delocalised its visa services to Delhi in 2019 and 20 MS are represented by the MS in location. Two MS are represented outside Colombo (Jaffna), with a visa application centre. For the Maldives, two MS are present in Male with a visa application centre.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Four meetings were held in 2020. They were convened by the EU which chaired and drafted the minutes of the meetings submitted to MS for final approval. Meetings have generally been well attended with an active participation on the part of MS and congenial atmospherics among participants who also include one observer. Local cooperation from and among missions is overall quite satisfactory.

The Chair and members of the group, however, continue to deplore the too rare presence of one MS at the local coordination meetings. Although there is a wide understanding that this is due to scarce human resources and workload at the mission, this MS's participation would be all the more valuable as it has been facing a number of challenges that were discussed at HoMs level end 2019 and are still in want of solutions. It is felt that a more regular participation would help find solutions and develop jointly best practices.

In contrast, despite the recent delocalisation of its Schengen activities to India the coordination with another MS has remained excellent with regular attendance to LSC meetings (both physically and digitally after the outbreak of COVID and the impossibility to travel without quarantine).

The COVID 19 crisis has had a considerable impact on the local representation of the Schengen MS of those who do not have a representation in Sri Lanka. Some MS have received instructions from the MS they represent to limit the issuance of visas to authorised categories, others are altogether no longer habilitated by MS they represented prior to the pandemic. One MS saw activities impeded by logistical issues such as not receiving the passports shipments to India where visa operations are now handled from after delocalisation in July 2019.

Since March 18 2020 and the EU entry ban on all essential travels, Schengen visa operations have mostly come to a halt. Since the closure of the airport to commercial flights in Colombo short-term Schengen visas have not been issued by MS. The airport remained closed until the end of 2020 also for Sri Lankan nationals and residents, who are thus primarily affected by re-entry restrictions in the absence of commercial flights.

Maldivian nationals and residents have also been impacted by entry restrictions in Sri Lanka insofar as they can no longer submit as per past practice their application in Colombo. This affects in particular those who have not yet submitted biometrics.

End 2020, Sri Lanka and Maldives were yet to be included on the list of third countries authorised for inbound travel.

For the few visas still delivered since the beginning of the pandemic MS have adhered to strict health guidelines. Applications have been processed systematically through VFS. There is a mandatory quarantine of 48 hours in a locked suitcase of passports. Other MS have kept passports in a heated room for 48 hours after arrival and regular disinfection of premises occurs.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

MS had only limited exposure to the new provisions of the Visa Code due to the suspension of normal Schengen procedures since March 2020 due to the pandemic.

During early discussions on the application of the Visa Code, it came out that some of the provisions lacked relevance in the local context such as the 6-months provision for submitting an application as people in Sri Lanka usually apply very late. MS believe that the three months practice will remain the norm.

MS were critical of the redesigning of the application form that was deemed impractical.

MS are generally prepared to ensure the tasks but the period was exceptional due to the COVID pandemic. As of now, no specific problem has emerged with regard to the implementation of the visa code.

EU highlighted that the new code compels to have a visa service, either through a mission, a representative MS or by outsourcing to an external service provider in every country. The issue is to be addressed by members of the LSC in the context of the Maldives.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

According to Schengen missions in Colombo, the support documents requested from visa applicants have so far been in agreement with the harmonized list dated 13 October 2011. Early 2020, a discussion was initiated in the group on how to respond to a proposal to harmonise the list with the LSC list drafted in Delhi.

While some MS reacted positively to the idea and one MS said it was already following a template close to India's, the suggestion was outright rejected by another MS. The latter expressed readiness in proposing amendments to the list as per its own experience, which are currently awaited.

MS regretted that the use of national forms was no longer allowed as it contributed to a valuable assessment of applicants.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In the first round of consultations, half of the MS reacted favourably to the cascade system which according to them eased the process and would allow for more predictability. One MS felt that the new regulation was not “dynamic enough”. Another MS stressed the political nature of the decision to provide MEVs. One MS felt it made the system more transparent for Schengen MS as well as for applicants.

Beginning of March, the majority of MS was satisfied with the general pattern of the cascade provision with the caveat that MEVs delivery can continue to be examined on a case-by-case basis. One MS only has a limited cascade for official visas but was considering extending it to all visa categories and insisted on coordination with partners in order to minimise visa shopping.

Due to the exceptional context since mid-March MS have had no extensive experience with the MEVs' cascade implementation.

d. Harmonisation of practices

e. Exchange of information

Exchange of statistics

There is room for improvement with regard to the exchange of statistics. One MS regretted non-reciprocity in the exchange of statistical information with another MS. EU does not receive statistics on a quarterly basis from most MS on location and will put it more specifically on agenda of the meetings.

Cases of fraud

MS have reported number of frauds with unauthentic information provided (ranging from fake documentation, falsification of passports, forged boarding passes, forged visa sticker including the recently introduced visa sticker, to non-existing companies).

There have been reports of cases where Sri Lankans have entered through non Schengen States to access the Schengen area by rail or road. On the issue of fake documents one MS conveyed that despite repeated complaints authorities had not taken any action yet.

There are no issues with banks which are registered with the Central Bank. There have however been regular issues with fake employment letters and certificates.

Cooperation with VFS was considered good by all MS.

VIS is commonly used but VISmail is deemed to be not user friendly which explains why most MS do not resort to it. Some think it slows the process.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

A line of exchange between MS designated focal points and the CID is to be launched to register frauds.

4. Challenges

In 2021, an increase in the number of applications is to be expected due to the long-time closure of the island.

The foreseen departure of the document adviser of one MS who detects frauds and irregularities for all MS will create a vacuum that will be difficult to fill and will increase the risk of frauds. MS are eager to explore possibilities for continuity.

There is a possibility that more applicants will use Schengen Visa for asylum-seeking.

The restart of operations of the external service provider VFS could be another challenge after months of interruption due to change of staff and training needs.

5. Other issues

Local representation of Schengen MS is due to resume after many months of interruption.

The visa application centre in the Maldives will accommodate five more MS in the near future. An additional MS is putting this high on its agenda.



EUROPEAN UNION

Delegation to the United Republic of Tanzania

31 January 2020

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

11 Member States are present and 11 are represented in *Dar es Salaam*.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The Member States have experienced a significant decrease in visa applications due to the temporary non-essential travel ban to the EU that was introduced mid-March 2020. With the Council decision on 30 June 2020, recommending a gradual lifting of the temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU, Member States in Dar es Salaam proceeded to make appointment systems operational again and resumed visa applications for few categories only. Few Member States process visa applications for applicants with residence, work or student permits, few have also decided to grant D visa restricted to the issuing country only and not applicable for the Schengen Zone. The LSC group, with a partial lockdown in Dar es Salaam, replaced physical meetings with web meetings.

The four LSC meetings held in 2020 (23 January, 23 April, 17 June and 10 December) were well attended and chaired by the Deputy Head of EU Delegation. There has been no ad hoc meetings organised on specific subjects concerning LSC.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Member States are receiving too few applications to put the new Visa Code into practice. It remains a theoretical question until the number of visa applications increase, the assessment should therefore be rescheduled until 2021.

The lack of a common and harmonised approach in processing applications for multiple-entry visas remains an issue. This also creates an opportunity for “visa shopping” whereby applications seek to submit their application at the consular representation with higher chances of issuing this type of visa. The LSC group agreed to move towards a harmonised approach in 2021 to avoid these issues.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Yet difficult to assess with decreased operations and only exceptional visas issued.

A list of harmonised supporting documents was latest shared in 2015 among the members of LSC group. This list will be subject for review and adoption of amendments before forwarded to the Visa Committee.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Mentioned in section 3.1.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Not yet applicable.

3.5 Exchange of information

- *quarterly statistics;*

Due to the low number of applications, few instances have occurred which have been shared internally.

- *Cases of fraud;*

Few instance of fraud attempts have been reported based on fraudulent documents provided to support the visa process. This information is informally shared between members of the LSC.

- *Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises);*

Member States and members of the LSC group have transferred their visa activities to VFS (Visa Facilitation Services Global) and more have yet to make the transfer once cleared with capitals.

- *Use of VISMail and the Visa Information System;*

LSC members experience continued complications in communicating through VIS, as it is not user friendly, which further minimizes communication. VIS is currently not utilised in Tanzania, however exchange of information is so far minimal and if significant then informally communicated.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

There is a need for better communication and flow of information between members of the LSC group, once one consular representation has rejected on a visa application. This will equip the next sought representation with better knowledge. It has in fact occurred that once rejected, the applicant will seek another representation for the issuance of visa.

In processing business visas for Tanzanian officials, it has been reported that threats of disrupting bilateral business relationship were made. Others receive rather harmless threats from extended family members related to normal tourist visas.



LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in THAILAND 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

In 2020, the number of Schengen States remained unchanged in Thailand. In total, there are nineteen Schengen States represented in Bangkok, namely Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), Luxembourg (LU), The Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovakia (SK), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE) and Switzerland (CH). Visas are issued by FI on behalf of Estonia, by DE for Lithuania, by HU on behalf of Latvia, and by AT on behalf of Malta and Slovenia. All non-Schengen EU Member States are invited to the LSC meetings as observers, without taking part in decision-making. Romania (RO) attended some LSC meetings in the 2020 reporting period.

Most Schengen States have outsourced their visa application processing services to private companies primarily as a result of an increased number of visa applications. Currently, in Bangkok, VFS Global processes visa applications for AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, FI, IT (Chiang Mai, and Phuket as well) NL, NO, and SE. TLS Contact manages applications for FR and PT, and BLS International for ES.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

COVID-19 has heavily affected Schengen States' visa operations. In 2019, there were 334,461 C visa applications, but this decreased to 69,476 in 2020 following the pandemic, which constitutes a drop of 80 per cent. There was a significant increase in the refusal rate in Q3 and Q4 for C visas amongst Schengen states. Likely reasons are (a) the quarantine requirements in Thailand (where every person entering Thailand must stay at a hotel or other facility repurposed for state quarantine for 15 days) and the inability by applicants to demonstrate that they had pre-arranged their return; (b) other formal requirements to do with COVID-19 in the EU; and (c) an increase in the number of questionable applications, most likely caused by the negative effects of COVID-19 on Thailand's tourism-related service/entertainment industry and the job market in general.

LSC coordination turned online for most of the year, with regular e-mail exchanges throughout 2020.

It was nonetheless possible to schedule physical LSC meetings at regular intervals at the premises of the EU Delegation. During the 2020 reporting period, a total of three LSC meetings were held, on 27 February 2020, 1 October 2020, and 2 December 2020. The meetings were chaired by the EU Delegation and well attended by EU and Schengen States. Reports of the meetings are drawn up by the EU Delegation and shared with EU Member States and Associated Schengen States and with DG HOME in Brussels. Non-Schengen EU Member States are always invited to attend as observers as well.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

No specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code have been identified.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

With the Commission Implementing Decision C (2017) 5853 of 30.08.2017 establishing the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants for short stay visas in Thailand, EU Member States and Schengen Associated States have applied the list since 15 September 2017. EU Member States and Schengen Associated States have continued to exchange views on the practical application of the common list in subsequent LSC meetings.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Discussions on this topic have taken place with a view to finding agreement locally, but have not yet been successfully concluded.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, visa services were largely interrupted during the second quarter of the year and a diversity of approaches subsequently emerged with regard to resuming them. Some countries resumed issuing C visas provided that the applicants were planning to stay for minimum period of time (although the required duration varied) while others did so only in exceptional cases or not at all.

By early December, a clear trend towards convergence was evident. Most Schengen countries had resumed issuing visas. Some differences remained regarding the required documents (in particular the need to submit reservations of return flights and Alternative State Quarantine). Only two Schengen countries did not issue visas following global instructions from their capital.

3.5 Exchange of information

Information regarding fraud and statistics was exchanged between the Schengen States via email and discussed during LSC meetings. The EU Delegation compiled the data and circulated yearly statistics among the EU Member States and Schengen Associated States.

Schengen States in Thailand have a common list of travel and health insurance companies and new applications are assessed during the LSC meetings. There are currently 43 companies on the common list. A point of concern emerged during the reporting period when a listed insurance company added a new pandemic clause to their contracts without prior notification. Under the Code of Conduct, insurance companies are required to notify the EU Delegation before introducing any change. The insurance company removed the clause after this violation of the Code of Conduct was raised with them.

Due to the pandemic, no activities were undertaken with regard to external service providers. The LSC concentrated rather on exchanges of practices concerning the delivery of services under pandemic conditions.

The VISMail and the Visa Information System are used by Schengen States, though not very frequently.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Nothing to report.

4. Challenges

One of the challenges identified in the 2018/2019 report was the significant increase in visa applications. Given the reversal of trends (a decrease in applications of 80 per cent due to the pandemic and related travel restrictions), this was no longer an issue in 2020. On the contrary, the challenge in 2020 consisted rather in adjusting to a significantly reduced workload, including in terms of staff management and reallocation of resources. A potential challenge over the next reporting period may be to adjust to an increased demand or a continued fluctuation of visa applications.

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.

This report has been approved by the Local Schengen Cooperation Group in Thailand.



EUROPEAN UNION

DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Port of Spain, 30 March 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago - 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

5 Member States (4 EU Schengen MS) are present and 13 Schengen MS are represented by them in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

The citizens of Trinidad & Tobago benefit from a visa waiver agreement with the EU since 28 May 2015 and no longer need a Schengen visa for short stays (90 days) within a six-month period. With regard to issuing Schengen visas for citizens of other countries residing in T&T, those who do not benefit from the Visa Waiver Scheme, the four EU Schengen MS present have agreements with the Schengen MS represented by them in case this MS is the main travel destination.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Trinidad and Tobago closed national borders (by air and by sea) at end of March 2020 for commercial flights as a major measure to prevent a Covid-19 pandemic and later to fight the spread of Covid-19 in the country. Consequently, visa applications sharply dropped or stopped altogether. Two MS resumed visa operations, except for tourist and Schengen visa as travellers may not return to Trinidad and Tobago in the absence of commercial flights. The number of applications and visa issued in the 2nd and 3rd quarters was single digit. Statistics for 4th quarter are not available yet. Borders were not re-opened by the end of the year and restrictions for travellers from Trinidad and Tobago apply for entry in some MS.

Three regular meetings – on 10 March, 16 July and 15 October - were held in the reporting period. All meetings were chaired by the EUD, two were attended by three MS and one by four MS. The meetings usually are held twice a year and they have been well attended. Invitations, attendance lists and minutes were drawn up and then formally established by the EUD.

Ad hoc meetings did not occur and were not deemed necessary.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

All EU actors present in Trinidad and Tobago are prepared to carry out their LSC tasks as described in the Visa Code. As Trinidad & Tobago is benefiting from a visa waiver agreement and only two MS represented are taking decisions on visas locally, these tasks are limited.

There are no reported issues on the implementation of the Visa Code.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already achieved. There were no changes to the harmonized lists of supporting documents for applications. Local adaptations are not required.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

If an applicant has previously received a Schengen visa, and depending on the circumstances of the applicant (financial means, relevance to the public interest or to the EU economies, etc.), MS usually issue a long-term visa, even if the first Schengen visa was issued by another MS. This long-term visa is usually first a 1-year MEV, and if the applicant subsequently repeats his demand, MS tend to issue 2-3 year MEVs. The maximum validity is 5 years.

d. Harmonisation of practices

See 3.3

e. Exchange of information

The exchange of information within the LSC refers to:

- quarterly statistics (currently up to 3rd quarter 2020);
- cases of fraud; and
- use of 'VisMail' (start December 2019) and use of the Visa Information System.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

EUD provides latest information on ETIAS on website and follows up with updates and respective information of MS.

4. Challenges

MS had agreed on continued exchange of information and best practices for communication on the topics under 3.5 above within the next reporting period (2021).

5. Other issues

N/A



22 March 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TUNISIA
2020 REPORT²⁹

1. Introduction

In Tunisia there are seventeen EU Member States present with fully fledged Embassies and Consulates (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden). Fifteen of those deliver Schengen visas, the other two, being Bulgaria, Romania, not yet members of the Schengen space, do not. One non-EU Member State also delivers Schengen visas (Switzerland).

Five Member States hold representation agreements in relation to visas: Austria represents Slovenia; Belgium represents Luxembourg; Switzerland represents Slovakia; Germany represents Lithuania and Latvia; and Finland represents Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, and Norway.

The COVID 19 pandemic have been heavily affecting the work of Consulates, which had to face a critical situation with reduced personnel, uncertain rules and a general confusion. Consulate's personnel had to quickly adapt to the new state of play and proved strong resilience given the exceptional unforeseen circumstances. All consulates were able to provide the necessary assistance to the public requesting for a Schengen visa and providing them with all the necessary explanations. Given the national travel *restrictive* measures, and the Schengen space travel limitations, the number of travels between Tunisia and the EU fell down sharply. During certain phases of the year, following their respective changes of travel restriction measures and local lockdown, some embassies interrupted the issuance of visa C, providing only D visas. Therefore, compared to the previous reporting period, the number of Schengen visa applications, fell down drastically too, by around 75% (over 200.000 in 2019 and around 50.000 in 2020). Visa C were mainly granted for business, study, health, family reunifications reasons. Tourist visa were reduced to the minimum and granted only during period where travel limitations were relaxed.

Concerning the number of visas issued by each Member States during the reporting period, it varies from a one-digit figure to 35429. The average refusal rate ranged between 8% and 30% was slightly higher (+6%) compared to 2019. Refusals are generally motivated by lack of justifications, such as supporting documents and fake/forged documents and visa shopping. Member States are fully engaged in reducing as much as possible the processing period, which ranges between 2 and 10 days for non-complicated cases. The processing exceeds the 15 days deadline only in limited and complex cases requiring special investigation and research. Because of the circumstances, some embassies decided to interrupt their contracts with their external service providers.

²⁹ The reporting period is January 2020 – December 2020

As for the previous years, consulates are facing increasing number of visa requests based on fake or forged documents, particularly concerning the university certificates or invitations, bank accounts, hotel reservations and business invitations. The trend for the months to come will be closely linked to the evolution of the COVID 19 in Tunisia and in the Schengen area. At the same time, the number of applicants complaining about alleged unjustified refusals and lengthy or difficult procedures to obtain visa remains significant. This, despite the fact that the Consulates have improved the speed and the efficiency of the processing mechanism.

Concerning the list of harmonised documents necessary to apply for a Schengen visa, consulates have been implementing it without noticeable problems.

Certain Member States also issue visas for Libyan nationals as an exceptional measure taking into account the closure of their Embassies in Tripoli.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Because of the COVID 19 exceptional circumstances and the lockdown in Tunisia, only two LSC meetings took place in the reporting period. All the meetings were well attended by Member States. The Political Section of the EUDEL chaired them. EUDEL drafted reports after each meeting and circulated them to the Member States. There is no coordination with the LSC in other locations besides Tunis as the general consulates are only located in the capital. The LSC meetings served as a good opportunity for the consuls to exchange on the topical issues related to their daily activities. For practical reasons, EUDEL organized the LSC meetings back to back with the Local Consular Group meetings, which were chaired by a representative of the EU ongoing presidency.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

In general, the Member States did not encounter major problems in the implementation of the new Visa Code and have been implementing it appropriately. Some problems have been detected in relation to the requirement of issuing visas within the 15-day period as some consulates have limited resources. Some Member State complained about the recurrent malfunction of the Vision service, which had caused delays in issuing the visas, and therefore led to non-respect of the 15 days deadline. To be noted that some Member States, also referring to the Visa Facilitation Agreement negotiations, affirmed that the 15 days timespan should not be reduced.

The vast majority of Member States are using the services of an external service provider to handle visa applications and are generally satisfied about their performance and efficiency. Due to lack of visa applications during the pandemic, some of them have suspended their contracts with the external service providers.

All Member States collect biometric data, either directly in their consulates or via the contracted external service provider.

The number of frauds and forgeries aiming at illegally obtaining a Schengen visa remains high. This trend continues in spite of the fact that the Member States have been improving their knowledge and capacities on these matters and despite the extra efforts put in place to prevent and detect the phenomenon. Most frequent frauds relate to: fake bank statements, fake hotel reservations, forged insurance certificates, forged birth/marriage certificates, invitation letters from unreliable institutes, and false declarations on the social security coverage (CNSS).

The Member States use additional resources to scan and detect visa requests supported by false documentation. They share information about fraudulent cases and best practices to counter such cases to avoid reoccurring fraud schemes. The LSC meetings represent an excellent opportunity for consulates to exchange openly on those matters and address the problems jointly.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The list was harmonised in 2019. However, the Member States are open for new harmonisation propositions on Schengen visas based on Art. 48.1 of the Visa Code.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Due to the restrictions on non-essential travel, applicants likely to enjoy the "MEV Cascade" have been limited during the year, however all embassies apply this principle in cases that meet the criteria under Article 24 (2). To be noted that many embassies were already using this criterion, hence it was not difficult to adapt to the provisions of Art. 24 (2) of the visa code extending the duration of visas depending on the situation and the number of visas previously granted to the applicant.

The Member States only issue multiple entry visas (MEVs) for periods of 1 to 2, 3 or 4 years. 5 year MEVs are not issued as the Tunisian passport only has validity for a maximum 5 years.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No other initiatives on harmonisation of practices have been elaborated; however, the Member States are open for new harmonisation propositions on Schengen visas based on Art. 48.1 of the Visa Code.

3.4 Exchange of information

The exchange of information was done through email, telephone, bilateral ad hoc meetings or through the regular LSC meetings. A specific consular WhatsApp chat was created in order to exchange information in real time. This channel has been used extensively and proved to be very handy for all colleagues. Statistics and other visa related questions are also circulated by email or shared during tours de table in LSC meetings. This information exchange touches upon a large variety of subjects related to the different challenges the Member States are confronted with in their daily work. Information exchange focuses in particular on specific fraud cases, visa statistics, interview procedures, visa shopping, and travel medical insurances.

All Schengen consulates have access and are using the Visa Information System (VIS) as it is an integral and essential part of the vetting process.

As of the VisMail, compared to the previous year, we note a minor improvement with some embassies finally able to use it. However, many use it only when it is necessary because they consider it far too long and complicated, and many messages go unanswered.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Not applicable

4. Challenges

Visa facilitation negotiations (in parallel with the readmission agreement negotiations), led by the EUDEL, are following their course with the Tunisian authorities. However, in 2020, because of the pandemic and of the difficulties in obtaining progresses on the parallel and linked readmission agreement talks, these negotiations did not advance.

The LSC Group discussed this issue since the result will have an impact on the activities carried out by the MS consulates. Issues subject to facilitation are: list of documented evidence justifying voyage; reduction of visa fees for certain categories; facilitation of the possibility of obtaining long-term multiple entry visas (5 years for certain categories); a reduction to 10 calendar days of the visa request procedure; and exempt holders of diplomatic/official passports of requiring a visa.

As previously underlined, the LSC Group has expressed its scepticism to the idea of reducing the number of calendar days to process a visa request. As to the visa exemption for diplomatic and Service passports holders, all the Member States, excluding Latvia, are already applying it.

5. Other issues

Not applicable

**LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TURKEY
2020 REPORT****1. Introduction**

There are 4 consular constituencies in Turkey. 20 Member States are present with consulates in Ankara, 16 in Istanbul, 3 in Izmir, and 1 in Edirne. The Local Schengen Cooperation (LSC Turkey) convenes, separately, in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted on visa work in 2020. Reduced travel, as well as the limitations on movements and regular lockdowns in place over extended periods of time often slowed down the daily functioning of the consulates and external service providers, in consequence of changing work patterns, reduced personnel, and suspension of processing of short-term visa in case of non-essential travel. Despite challenges, minimum consular services were upheld throughout 2020.

The LSC Turkey moved online, but continued with high frequency. Regular meetings took place in January (ANK, IST), April (ANK, IST), June (IST), July (ANK, IST), OCT (IZM), November (ANK), and December 2020 (IST). Several ad hoc meetings – in the LSC Turkey as well as a smaller drafting group format - were also held throughout the year on the unique topic of the harmonized list of accompanying documents.

The LSC Turkey were chaired by the EU delegation, which also drew up reports.

The LSC Turkey endorsed EUDEL proposal to hold meetings every two months as of 2021.

3. State of play**3.1. Application of the Visa Code**

The LSC Turkey was well prepared to ensure tasks under the new Visa Code, which entered into force in February 2020. The ongoing pandemic and a prolonged period of reduced activities by the consulates, however, rendered it difficult to assess the novelty of the Visa Code in all its aspects. First discussions took place to find a harmonised approach to the “cascades” as in Article 24 (2) of the Visa Code.

The provision of minimum visa services, as well as the possibility to resume the visa services by the consulates featured more prominently on the agenda of the LSC Turkey in 2020. As part of the measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, most Schengen countries have suspended the processing of short stay visa applications for non-essential travel. Schengen countries’ consular authorities were, however, invited to follow the guidelines on ‘minimum service’ for processing of visa applications from specific categories of visa applicants during the COVID-19 emergency period. The required minimum consular services were provided by all Member States, with one or

two temporary exceptions in various consular constituencies. Later on, Member States re-started visa issuance to family members, students, sport, culture, and business, with the ongoing exception of tourism.

The LSC Turkey generally agreed that questions related to visa issuance to Turkish truck drivers remained a major factor. On various occasions, the LSC Turkey exchanged views on the underlying problems related to the rejection of Schengen visa applications by Turkish professional truck drivers, noting that the scale of such rejections was negligible and due to objective criteria (quality of applications, visa shopping, document fraud).

3.2. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The LSC Turkey agreed to the need to update the harmonised list of supporting documents; the work on a new draft, including a few rounds of comments with the Visa Committee, lasted throughout 2020. In December 2020, the LSC Turkey sent its latest input, in time for the next Visa Committee on 2 February 2021. Once the LSC proposal approved by the Visa Committee, the internal Commission procedures for formal adoption – in the form of an implementing decision - can be launched, with a tentative timeline of +/- 3 months.

3.3. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The LSC Turkey had the first exchange of views to assess the opportunity to adapt the rules on the issuing of multiple entry visas to visa applicants in Turkey (more favourable or more restrictive rules in accordance with Art. 24 Visa Code). With current practices among the member states diverging (notably for truck drivers), the LSC Turkey will revert to the issue in 2021. The standard Visa Code provisions continue to apply.

3.4. Exchange of information

The LSC Turkey held regular exchange of views on statistics and cases of fraud, as well as informed about individual Member States' approaches to the necessities caused by the COVID-19 pandemics (e.g. changes in the quarantine and test regimes).

The LSC agreed that due to the COVID-19 pandemic the total number of visa application will surely be considerably lower than in 2019. Yet the limited number of statistics provided to EUD excluded detailed analysis over the period of 2020. EUD urged Member States to send the statistics in the new format (1 statistical table/MS incl. the numbers from all cities where they are represented) to EUD at their earliest convenience. Discussion on quarterly statistics shall not only allow timely comparison of trends and figures among the consular constituencies, but also point to the possible areas of further harmonisation, e.g. the existence of significant discrepancies in the share of MEVs issued by individual consulates, as well as in the refusal rates.

The LSC Turkey exchanged regular information on fraudulent applications and accompanying documents. In particular, the LSC Turkey focused on the cases of Turkish truck drivers, including cases of truck drivers holding two ordinary passports (legitimate in Turkey) and applying separately with both passports to circumvent short-stay rule under the Visa Code. Cases of fake driving licences used by truck drivers and frequent falsification of transport documents (T1) were also discussed, as well as cases of fake invitations.

4. Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to remain the major challenge to the resumption of regular consular work in Turkey also in 2021. The LSC Turkey will continue to discuss the level of visa services provided in order to ensure coherence in approaches towards specific categories of travellers.

5. Other issues

As of 2 March 2020, Turkey granted visa exemptions to the ordinary passport-holders of Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Spain for their touristic short-stay travels to Turkey. All EU member states, with the exception of Cyprus, are now visa-free.

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in *Abu Dhabi* 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

The 27 Member States are present in the UAE (all except HR with an Embassy in Abu Dhabi). IT, DE, FR, HR, BG, DK, NL, RO, MT have consulates in Dubai. Two EU/Schengen MS (DE, CH) have an airport liaison officer in Dubai airport who also informed other MS by courtesy when relevant.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

EUDEL organised seven LSC meetings (one in person, the rest online), which is a marked increase of frequency, compared to 2019, which was due to the Covid-19 crisis and its consular and Schengen consequences. The LSC/Consular group was the prime forum of coordination for Covid-19 related matters since the start of the pandemic (relevant discussions also took place in HoMs when necessary, including in weekly extraordinary HoMs at the beginning of the pandemic).

All meetings were well attended (average of 20 to 27 MS present). All were chaired by EUDEL, in good coordination with the rotating presidency. CH and NO are usually invited to stay for the non-Schengen parts of the meeting as observers. Reports are drafted by EUDEL and circulated to EUMS. Besides the LSC meetings, frequent coordination took place via email, phone and two WhatsApp groups.

All EUMS stopped visa issuances at the outset of the pandemic, except for the categories permitted in the EU recommendations.

Overall the LSC/Consular group performed well during the Covid-19 crisis in challenging circumstances. Abu Dhabi was the scene of an early Covid-19 outbreak (February 2020) which took place in the framework of an international cycling event in which many EU citizens were involved. This resulted in the delegation and MS embassies having to immediately step up their crisis response (coordination with health and consular authorities, repatriations, etc.). It also constituted a real life exercise of what was to come as the next months (March, April) involved, just like everywhere else, a general lockdown, border closures, and intensive repatriation efforts.

The rest of the year (May to December) were mainly devoted to the exchange information and coordinating the application of the local authorities' measures, the monitoring of specific difficulties, notably on the return of EU nationals/residents in the UAE, and the exchange of information on the border situation in the EU/Schengen. In addition, EUDEL held numerous dialogues and undertook local outreaches to the local authorities in order to request clarity on the local measures, to explain EU measures, to ensure compliance to the Vienna conventions on diplomatic and consular relations when necessary, etc. EUDEL also kept close contacts with the local airlines and other stakeholders to exchange information on border restrictions and to improve coordination. Likewise, EUMS who demarched the authorities on border issues duly informed the LSC group.

EUDEL, as well as the LSC/consular group had access to local expertise on the epidemiologic situation due to the presence of an EU expert at the CBRN Centre of Excellence. This expertise was mobilized several times.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

The LSC regularly discussed the implementation of the visa code as well as the Schengen/UAE visa waiver agreement. Discussions have notably focused on ensuring that the exchange rate applied for visa charges are without large discrepancies which could lead to visa shopping.

In the context of the travel restrictions linked with the pandemic, the Delegation held numerous outreaches towards the authority in the name of the member states in order to request information on entry to the UAE by EU/Schengen nationalities in the framework the Schengen/UAE visa waiver agreement, and to request equal treatment of member states. We also liaised with the authorities on the suspension, then on the reinstatement of the Visa Waiver agreement in the context of the pandemic.

The group has also discussed the implementation of the revised visa code which entered into force in 2020, in particular the application of the cascade system.

In 2020, the group also approved a new list of supporting documents for visa applications. That list was then approved in Brussels and has entered into force.

The group coordinates the updates of the member states travel advices, in particular in the crisis context.

A specific group, not coordinated by EUDEL but which also includes like-minded countries, regularly exchanges information on documents fraud trends in the country.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list has been revised in 2020 after discussions locally and there is therefore no need to revise it at this stage. The LSC will monitor the implementation when normal visa operations re-start.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In early 2020, the group discussed in particular the application of the "cascade system" related to longer validity of multiple entry visas: whether local circumstances would call for adapting the general rules for certain group of applicants, notably domestic workers accompanying families (such group, which could carry increased irregular/illegal immigration risk, could be given shorter validity than the general rules). This issue would need further considerations.

d. Harmonisation of practices

During the Covid-19 crisis, the group also discussed the EU guidance for the exceptional handling of visa applications and a closely coordinated approach in the re-start of visa application.

The LSC group was informed and kept up-to-date of the bi-monthly questionnaire in the framework of the gradual removal of temporary border restrictions in the EU/Schengen. The responses to the questionnaire were drafted by EUDEL with the rotating presidency (DE).

Demarches were carried out to facilitate the entry of seafarers in the context of changes of crews (this included a letter from the HRVP to his counterpart) and high-skilled EU/Schengen nationals.

e. Exchange of information

Exchange of information within the LSC:

- *quarterly statistics*; in the context of the very few visa applications due to the covid-19 pandemic, statistics were not collected regularly and trends difficult to observe.
- *cases of fraud*: regular exchange on fraud, also in a dedicated group.
- *travel medical insurance (TMI)* (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI): adequate no problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules to our knowledge.
- cooperation with local authorities is sometimes challenging (lack of reactivity from the local authorities).
- *cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises)*: no problem to report.
- *use of VISMail and the Visa Information System*; no problem to report.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

Subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2021):

The main challenge will be to coordinate the restart of normal visa operations once the covid-19 crisis recedes.

Once in normal operations, we will also focus on the implementation of the new visa code and the new harmonised list of documents.

5. Other issues

N/A



EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

Kampala 31/01/2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in *UGANDA* 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

11 Members States present in Kampala.

For the purpose of issuing Schengen visas: The Netherlands representing Hungary, Slovenia; Norway³⁰ representing Denmark, Lithuania, Iceland; Germany representing Austria, Estonia, partly representing Switzerland³¹; Belgium, representing Luxembourg; Italy representing Malta, Slovakia; France representing Spain, Portugal, Greece, Czech Republic, Sweden. However, earlier 2020 France suspended visa representation agreement. Sweden refers to its Embassy in Nairobi for issuing visas.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

During the reporting period, two have taken place: 27th February and 24th November 2020. They were well attended. The Covid pandemia disrupted the planned following meetings and coordination, especially related to Visa/Consular had to be done remotely. A consular whatsapp group was created focused mainly on the coordination and organization of the repatriation flights during lockdown and closure of the airport (April to September). During this period there were several situations where coordination from EU was required in terms of visa/consular emergency situations for EU stranded citizens with no consular representation in Uganda.

Due to Covid outbreak any other regular meeting was suspended and just started back in November, with more focus on consular security as per the coming general elections January 2021.

The LSC meetings are organised and chaired by the EU Delegation. The EU Delegation is also in charge of reporting and coordination of the follow-up steps when needed. MS are free to share the EU Delegation reports with their capitals should they so wish.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

Nothing special to highlight neither from LSC nor from the MS in terms of preparedness and application of the Visa Code.

³⁰ The reception of visa applications for Norway and the countries it represents is sent to Nairobi.

³¹ Germany processes visa applications from holders of diplomatic and official passports only; all other applications are handled by the Swiss Embassy in Norway

Within the main challenges remains the analysis of the “original supporting documents” that are either fake or genuine but obtained fraudulently in Uganda (bank statements, residence permits of non-Ugandans, employment letter, etc.). This obstacle carries forward to a second challenge, the uncertainty of what happens when such problem cases are handed over to local authorities (no follow up/feedback, etc.).

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

We are pleased to note that a draft standard document listing the minimal requirements for supporting documents exists for all Member States to adhere to. There is no negative feedback from applicants or the visa outsourcing center pointing to any deviation by other member state in Kampala in this point.

The only recurring point that still could be enhanced is the fact that Member States apply different euro exchange rates, resulting in different costs when paid in local currency.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (‘MEV cascades’)

Overall, it was established that MS practices are harmonised. The length of validity of multi entry visas (MEVs) varies between MS from less than one year in some cases and 1 to 2 years in others.

The general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (‘MEV cascades’) are being followed

d. Harmonisation of practices

Exchange of information about visa applicants and files has now been constrained to the use of the VIS-mail. Unfortunately, not all member states appear to be at the same level of integration with this system as other. This therefore renders the process both very slow and at worst impossible to implement as set out on paper. A speedy harmonisation of this system needs to be envisaged.

4. Challenges

- To finalise the update of the list of unrepresented EU nationals so that we all know who is representing whom.
- To increase the exchange of information and statistics.
- Delays on Visa processing due to the difficulty to harmonize Visa rules and national anti – Covid rules.

5. Other issues

N/A

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Ukraine 2020³² REPORT

1. Introduction

24 EU Member States are present in Kyiv³³ and six are represented in further consulates beyond Ukraine's capital. Two non-EU Schengen states (NO, CH) are also represented in Kyiv.³⁴ Luxemburg (represented in Ukraine by Belgium for visa matters), Malta (represented by Italy) and Iceland (represented by Norway) have no direct representation.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Four regular LSC meetings were held in 2020, the first (end January) hosted by the EU Delegation on its premises. As a result of Covid-19 restrictions the meeting scheduled for March was cancelled but LSC representatives increased their exchanges of information by e-mail and made effective use of a WhatsApp group launched by EUDEL. Subsequent meetings (May, September and November) were conducted online using the Webex platform.

As a result of Covid-19 measures, a majority of Member States also scaled back or suspended their visa operations as of March but these have been resumed gradually since June.

LSC meetings are chaired by the EU Delegation and held back-to-back with Local Consular Coordination meetings (chaired jointly with Council Presidency). Meetings are generally very well attended, including by non-Schengen Member States. US Embassy (Consul General and Deputy) participated in one meeting at EUDEL invitation.

Coordination with consulates in locations outside the capital is ensured through respective Member State Embassies. Consulates located outside Kyiv regularly report on Schengen visas issued. Since 2019, Member States report consolidated visa data per country to facilitate information flows and ensure the consistency of data provided.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

LSC discussed the revision of the Visa Code and follow-up and in view of the Regulation's application from 2 February 2020. The Visa code is applied by Member State in accordance with instructions received from their capitals. LSC has repeatedly discussed procedures for issuance of visas to holders of multiple passports. Some countries continue to issue visas to holders of both non-biometric and biometric passports upon instruction from their capitals, despite guidance from the European Commission not to issue visas to applicants known to be in possession of a separate biometric passport entitling its holder to visa-free travel.

³² January-December 2020 (new reporting period)

³³ Not including UK, since departure from EU. Ireland (non-Schengen) is in the process of opening an embassy.

³⁴ Ukrainian visa request for Norway are handled by the latter's embassy in Ankara.

Member States also discussed the placing of a visa application stamp in the passport upon receipt of a visa request, where practice differs across Member States.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

As of 15 May 2014 a list of supporting documents is fully operational in Ukraine. Given the introduction of a visa-free regime for Ukraine, discussion of this matter is not of major importance, visa applications having dropped significantly. Member States discussed previously the need to amend the harmonised list of supporting documents upon EUDEL initiative. There is no unanimous view on the need to maintain a requirement to provide flight reservations for tourist visa applicants. Some Member States do not enforce this requirement.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Some discrepancies continue to be observed in the practice of issuing C-visas for work purposes and the issuing of long-term validity MEVs. Validity of MEVs averages about one year, with exception for some countries that mainly issue longer-term MEVs, above all for family members and well-established foreign resident businessmen. At least one Member State does not issue MEVs to Ukrainian nationals. Validity of MEVs is often restricted by the overall validity of the passport.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

EUDEL and LSC representatives exchanged information including EU guidance in the Covid-19 context relating to minimum visa service provision and postponed visa-validity requests in March 2020.

Given the entry into force of the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens in June 2017, this question has lost practical relevance as the overall number of Schengen visa has dropped significantly. No complaints have been recorded as to a non-uniform application of rules for the issuance of Schengen visa.

3.5 Exchange of information

EUDEL collects visa statistics, based on a new template since January 2020. Statistics compiled are presented in regular intervals to Member States. As a result of Covid-19 restrictions, visa applications and issuance was reduced almost to zero in the second quarter of 2020, resuming gradually only as of June.

LSC also discusses fraud practices and travel medical insurance, although since October 2018 the list of insurance companies approved for Schengen visas maintained previously by one embassy was discontinued. This was a result of reduced demand for Schengen visas and consideration that national visas are guided by national provisions set by countries individually.

LSC members discussed the use of external service providers. Despite visa liberalisation, several Schengen-participating states continues to make use of ESPs.

As a result of visa liberalisation, discussions have focused increasingly on matters related to the issuance of national (D) visas.

Member States discussed the use of VIS (all but one MS reported to have full access) and raised cooperation with local authorities and companies as appropriate. As per agreement in the November 2019 LSC meeting, Member States in Kyiv have as of 1 January 2020 used only VIS-Mail for any communication of visa applicant data and ceased communication by non-encrypted e-mail to respect applicable data protection rules.

3.6. Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

Following the introduction of visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens to the Schengen area, continuing decreases in the number of visa applications led to further reduction of staff in some MS consular sections. Some Member States cancelled contracts with ESPs as a result of lower demand for Schengen visas, while others see steady demand for national visas and maintain contractual arrangements.

Outstanding challenges (noted in 2018-2019) include cases of forgery of supporting documents and visa applicants being misled by service provider intermediaries (in applications for residence permits or national visas) persisted and require continuing attention from Member States, though incidences were reduced as a result of reduced travel.

A number of Member States have followed or noted poorly justified searches and what appear to be continuing or recurring investigations (further letters to this effect were received in November 2020) and proceedings against VFS Consulting Services Ukraine, one of the main ESPs, based on allegations of fraud or financial misconduct.

Rejection rates for visa applications (as a proportion of significantly reduced visa issuance) continued to increase throughout the reporting period. This is believed to be due largely to an increased share of foreign (non-Ukrainian) applicants for Schengen visas. Member States continue to suspect that relatively lax provisions for foreign students in Ukraine may be used as a means to access the Schengen area.

The fact that some Ukrainian citizens continue to hold multiple passports continues to represent a challenge for consular departments. Cases where Ukrainians hold both non-biometric and biometric passports make tracking of travel and the respect of the 90/180 days rule difficult. In addition, some Ukrainian citizens possess two biometric passports. Going forward, ways should be found to identify holders of multiple passports and Ukraine should be encouraged to undertake more efforts to tackle the matter.

As of 17 March 2020, Ukraine implemented a significant series of measures in response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, including a general ban on the entry of foreign citizens, with exceptions, and the suspension of all regular commercial international flights, train and bus traffic in and out of Ukraine. Member States sharing a border with Ukraine also introduced a series of restrictions as of mid-March, including the closure of most border-crossing points. In addition to called on citizens abroad to return to Ukraine for the period of quarantine restrictions and

organising several hundred special flights to facilitate this repatriation, the Ukrainian authorities also implemented a broad prohibition on citizens leaving the country, with exceptions including for example those with residence permits in EU Member States, upon request from the EU and individual diplomatic missions.

The result of these measures, both on the part of the Ukrainian authorities and those of its neighbours, was a dramatic reduction in all travel in and out of Ukraine. Visa applications and issuance was reduced almost to zero in the second quarter of 2020, resuming gradually only as of June, when the generalised restriction on international travel was lifted by the Ukrainian authorities. The vast majority of travellers from Ukraine have nonetheless been prohibited entry to the Schengen area by the temporary restrictions on non-Schengen countries imposed by Member States following the Council's recommendation of March 2020. The effective suspension of most (not only visa free) travel for Ukrainian citizens to the Schengen area required substantial outreach and public engagement by LSC representatives and EUDEL regarding the conditions for exemption (such as work permits) as well as on the expected resumption of travel options.

Challenges signalled by LSC representatives relating to the resumption of visa operations as of June 2020 (as per consultation by EUDEL on the basis of COM questionnaire) include limitations on visa issuance capacity for example as a result of physical distancing requirements in consulates, as well as category limitations (temporary measures) enforced by capitals.

Falsified Ukrainian Covid-19 PCR test certificates, required by several Member States for entry to their territories, was also raised as an issue by several LSC representatives.

The LSC has also on several occasions discussed the implications of 2019 and 2020 Russian Federation decrees facilitating and introducing changes to rules on the recognition of documents used to provide residents of non-Government controlled eastern Ukraine with Russian passports. LSC took note of EU statements and October 2019 Guidelines recalling territorial competence and including criteria for the identification of such passports, also in view of non-recognition policies, since implemented by most Member States. Member States have not encountered any supporting documents issued by non-recognised entities in the non-Government controlled areas of eastern Ukraine during the reporting period.

While the illegal Russian annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol in March 2014 continues to impact consular activities of EU MS, consulates in Ukraine effectively receive very few visa requests from residents of Crimea, presumably because most residents either apply for visas in third countries with foreign travel documents issued by the Russian Federation (partially issued elsewhere than in Crimea) or are in possession of biometric Ukrainian passports.

LSC also discussed the rollout of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (application postponed until January 2022) and EUDEL circulated elements for public communication necessitated by some widespread public misinformation.

This Report has been approved by the Embassies of EU Member States and Schengen Associated States in Kyiv.

February 2021

**LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) – UNITED KINGDOM (LONDON)
2020 REPORT**

1. Introduction

As regards Member States and associated states' presence in the United Kingdom, the situation remains unchanged compared to the previous reporting period: All are present in London for the purpose of processing visas. Seventeen Member States cooperate with an external service provider for the purpose of the collection of visa applications. Sixteen Member States are present in Edinburgh (eleven only 'via' an external service provider); eleven Member States are present in Manchester (nine only 'via' an external service provider); four Member States are present via an external service provider in Cardiff; one Member is present via an external service provide in Birmingham.

Because of the pandemic in Member States' visa operations in the United Kingdom plummeted in 2020 compared to the usual volume: approx. 75 000 applications were processed (277 743 in 2019). The refusal rate rose from 4.3 % in 2019 to 8.4%.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

In spring 2020 the recently established EU Delegation took over the coordination of LSC in United Kingdom from the Commission (DG HOME) that had been coordinating these exchanges since 2010. Because of the sanitary crisis the three meetings held in 2020 were virtual.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

No major problems with the implementation the Visa Code has been noted, but questions are regularly raised regarding specific issues of implementation. The interaction between Directive 2004/38/EC on the free movement of family members of EU citizens is on the agenda of each meeting. Because of the pandemic it has not been possible to observe the impact, if any, of the revised rules (the Visa Code) applicable since February 2020.

Work on a revision of the harmonised list of supporting documents³⁵ started in 2020 and is well advance and could be formally adopted in spring 2021.

³⁵ Commission Implementing Decision C(2012) 4726 (11.7.2020)

b. Exchange of information

Member States continue to exchange information on various operational subjects which in 2020 focused on resumption of visa operations, implications of the end of the transitional period before The UK's withdrawal from the European Union. DG HOME shared, when relevant, information from the relevant Council and Commission fora (Visa Working Party, Visa Committee etc.).

4. Challenges in 2021

Work should start on assessing the need for a local adaptation of the general rules on the issuing of multiple entry visas with a long validity (Article 24(2) and (2b)).



Washington D.C., 23 February 2021

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in UNITED STATES (*Washington D.C.*) 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

All EU Member States (MS) are present in Washington, D.C., as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland (Schengen Associated Countries - SAC). Since U.S. citizens do not need visas for short stays in the Schengen area, the issuance of Schengen visas is generally limited to third-country nationals legally staying in the US.

For the purpose of LSC in Washington D.C., Denmark, Estonia and Finland are represented by their consular posts in New York City. Estonia issues Schengen visas in New York City for Latvia and Latvia issues Schengen visas in Washington D.C. for Estonia. Liechtenstein is represented by Switzerland for LSC purposes. Some consulates (Netherlands as Regional Support Office, Estonia, Luxembourg) also issue visas for third-country nationals residing outside the U.S., either due to non-representation in certain countries or following the centralisation of visa issuance in Washington D.C. as a Regional Support Office.

So far, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden are using external service providers in the US³⁶.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Five meetings were held in 2020: in June, July, September, October and December (compared to one meeting per semester in previous years), and were very well attended. The EU Delegation chaired the meetings and drew up the reports in consultation with the LSC group. There is no systematic coordination of the Schengen cooperation outside of Washington D.C.

In 2020, the focus was on the restrictions on non-essential travel imposed by both the E.U. and the U.S. due to the COVID-19 crisis and on the operation of visa services under these specific circumstances.

The conduct of visa operations during the COVID-19 crisis was influenced by several factors: disparities in the epidemiological situation of States across the U.S. and hence different levels of lock-down/opening-up (many MS have Consulates General at other locations than D.C.); uncertainty as to the evolution of the pandemic; safety precautions at embassy/consulate premises (hygiene, social distancing measures, etc.); limited number of appointments and the lack of personnel due to the limitation of presence at the office at any given time. Some Member States reported additional burdens on their services, i.e. the need to provide regular information to

³⁶ Some of these countries use external service providers in some locations only.

travellers on the evolving situation given travel restrictions imposed by both the E.U. and the U.S. A number of questions were raised as to the categories of persons to whom visas can be issued (notion of "essential travel") and whether there are additional documents required (e.g. travel insurance covering COVID-19). Those Member States who have outsourced the visa services also depended on the capacity of the service provider to re-open their offices.

During the reporting period, the majority of MS and SAC reported a sharp decrease in the number of Schengen visas issued since March as compared with 2019, due to limited categories of allowed travellers. At the same time, some MS informed that they delivered new certificates (or "laissez passer") to travellers to the E.U. to prove their status of "essential traveller".

Since travel restrictions were imposed on both sides of the Atlantic, LSC meetings were a unique occasion for MS and SAC to regularly exchange information and provide updates on measures implemented at the E.U. external borders (list of essential travellers, COVID-19 testing and quarantine requirements) and about the U.S. travel restrictions introduced as of March 2020 through Presidential Proclamations 9993 and 9996. The U.S. suspended entry of travellers who were present in the Schengen area and Ireland 14 days prior to their travel to the U.S. which effectively prevented a large number of European citizens, holders of U.S. non-immigrant visas, from entering the United States. This treatment was more restrictive than the equivalent restrictions imposed by the E.U. on U.S. citizens in a comparable situation. In July, the administration introduced a "national interest exception" mechanism covering some categories of non-immigrant visas (mainly economic and students) while still not allowing a large number of European citizens living in the U.S. on the basis of non-immigrant visas to re-enter the U.S from the Schengen countries and Ireland. This followed representation to the administration with the EUDEL coordinating and delivering two EU demarches/joint letters together with the local EU Presidency, in June and December respectively, on behalf of the EU27 and SAC asking the U.S. to allow, based on the principle of reciprocity, expanded categories of European citizens, holders of non-immigrant visas, to enter the United States while complying with all necessary sanitary measures.

LSC meetings were also an opportunity to exchange information about other anti-immigration measures taken by President Trump to protect the U.S. workers at the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the restrictions on the issuance of some categories of visas for most guest workers who come to the U.S. for temporary or seasonal work.

Finally, the EUDEL coordinated with MS and SAC and delivered an EU joint comment to the public consultation concerning a proposal from the Dept. of Homeland Security to shorten admission periods for three categories of visa applicants, namely journalists, exchange visitors and academic students. Following receipt of a large volume of comments, this proposal is currently on hold.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

Over the reporting period, the issue of the travel medical insurance (TMI) was discussed. No specific problems were reported regarding TMI as only a few visas have been issued in 2020 but some MS asked for clarification as to what extent travel medical insurance must explicitly mention COVID-19 related coverage. It was explained that the consulates should not refuse a visa application which does not explicitly mention COVID-19 but rather check that it does not exclude possible expenses linked to it.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

This matter has not been discussed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

This matter has not been discussed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

d. Harmonisation of practices

This matter has not been discussed due to the COVID-19 crisis, except for the TMI (see point 3.1).

e. Exchange of information

MS and SAC exchanged on their experiences concerning the visa operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation with external service providers and challenges therein. They also regularly exchanged information and updates about the national requirements in place with respect to travel to their territories, categories of essential travellers allowed to enter the E.U. and other requirements (testing, quarantine). Information was also shared about measures taken by the U.S. during the pandemic (travel restrictions, restrictions related to issuance of certain categories of visas, etc.).

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

During the LSC meetings, the EUDEL shared information and updates about the work of the U.S. administration on pilot projects for COVID-19 tested flights to restart international travel. As part of the pilot, passengers on selected flights from the U.S. to some MS are tested before the departure and upon arrival to avoid quarantine upon arrival.

Upon request from MS, the EUDEL coordinated a compilation and subsequent updates of MS and SAC Testing and Quarantine Requirements Table summarising national requirements imposed by all MS and SAC.

Also upon request from MS, the EUDEL created a "Schengen" WhatsApp group limited to the LSC community for a timely exchange of updates and questions on visas and travel restrictions. This communication channel proved extremely efficient in the consular community at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

4. Challenges

In 2020, the frequency of meetings (in virtual format) was considerably increased as compared to previous years due to the COVID-19 crisis (from one per semester to 5 in 6 months). The exchange of information remained the area where the group has provided the biggest benefit during the crisis, and should be further encouraged.

In 2021, it is expected that the LSC group will continue to meet on a regular, more frequent basis until the lifting of travel restrictions on both sides and the resumption of international travel.

5. Other issues

This report was endorsed by all MS and SAC.

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in Hanoi, Vietnam 2020 REPORT

1. Introduction

18 EU Member States, together with Switzerland and Norway, are represented in Hanoi. LU is represented by BE, PT by ES and the three Baltic states by FR. For the rest of unrepresented EU citizens, consular assistance is provided by EUDEL.

DE, FR, HU, IT and NL have Consul Generals in Ho Chi Minh city. 13 MS have Honorary Consuls (HC) in HCMC (AT, CY, CZ, EE, FI, EL, LT, MT, PL, RO, SK), 3 MS have HC in Hanoi (LV, LT, PO), 1 MS has HC in Haiphong (CZ) and 1 MS in Danang (ES).

Several member states have engaged with private companies to handle the receipt of visa applications, including recording biometric data.

UK does not participate to any EU coordination groups since September 2019.

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

Only one LSC meeting took place in Hanoi, in February 2020. After this, the COVID-19 outbreak redirected our focus on consular matters. As EU MS stopped most of their visa operations, LSC meetings were suspended till end 2020. 11 LCC meetings were organised in the course of the year, physically (and on a few occasions, on-line), with the participation of CH and NO, as well as like-minded countries, at the beginning of the outbreak. Representatives from WHO as well as expatriate doctors were invited as guest speakers on a number of occasions.

All meetings have been very well attended and the level of coordination was truly exemplar, from organising the repatriation of stranded European tourists via UCPM flights to exchange of information, joint outreach to VN authorities or drafting Note Verbale on common behalf regarding quarantine conditions, return flights or visa extensions.

The LSC and LCC meetings were chaired by EUDEL in the first semester of 2020 (on request of Croatia for the LCC). Coordination work was extended to the non-represented countries, which were constantly updated via email and chat groups (including CH, IS, NO).

Reporting has been done by EUDEL.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The Visa Code is strictly applied, however, since mid-March 2020 almost no C-visa applications were recorded.

No specific problem relating to the implementation of the Visa Code was brought to the attention of the group.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Harmonised List was adopted in 2019. The LSC group is informed that the approved list is mandatory and must be advertised on the MS embassies' websites. It has been implemented and no particular issue has been raised, taking into account that there were only 2.5 months of normal visa issuing.

MS seem satisfied and haven't raised any particular need for revision for the time being.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS have adapted to the general rules for issuing MEV, although very few applicants from Vietnam were eligible for a long multiple entry visa based on Art 24(2) of the code. In one limited case, MS were instructed differently (the case of sailors stuck following the pandemic outbreak).

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No particular problem was flagged, besides two issues recurrently raised by EU MS:

- Exchange rate: several MS are asking the EUDEL to provide regular euro exchange rate data so that they can harmonise their fees and avoid potential visa shopping. However, MS have many different formulas and rules for their visa fees so this would not solve the problem. The best we could do is point them to the "inforeuro" page on the Commission website:
<https://ec.europa.eu/budget/graphs/inforeuro.html>
- Proof of return – MS have asked that proof of readmission to Vietnam be added to the harmonised list of documents requested before issuing visas. This would likely take the form of some official document or Note Verbale issued by the Vietnam authorities.

3.5 Exchange of information

Statistics for the year 2019 were exchanged beginning of 2020. Due to the small numbers of visas issued in 2020, no discussion was dedicated to this topic. More work on statistics is expected in 2021, when they will be exchanged regularly.

No cases of fraud were brought to the LSC forum, probably due to the very limited visa activity, tightening of border controls and limited travel opportunity (*since July 2020, Vietnamese are banned from non-essential travel*).

Throughout the year, a very close collaboration has been assured with the VN Government Office and the Immigration Department at the Ministry of National Security, as well as airlines, thanks to one MS police liaison officer keeping the group informed of all new travel updates in real time. Representatives of airlines were invited when a few companies operating cargo flights were allowed to carry some inbound passengers (*note: inbound commercial flights to VN are suspended since March 2020*).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

As mentioned above, the Group took special care of updating the members on all regulations with regard to EU-VN travel and transit, as well as transit restrictions in MS (*particularly relevant for the optimal use of UCPM fights*). In this regard, updated contacts and information were circulated, through email but essentially chat groups, which allowed more informal and immediate communication and sharing.

EUDEL regular reporting on the COVID-19 situation was shared among MS. The LCC became the group directly tasked by the HoMS for follow-up on COVID-19 situation, as well as putting together initiatives for outreaching VN authorities.

4. Challenges

Possible discrepancies between the national practices vis-à-vis entry into various MS will remain a problem during the pandemic. However, the coordination between the MS is well advanced and the consular officers usually manage to solve in practice all arising problems.

5. Other issues

	Visa C submitted	Visa C refused	Visa D submitted	Visa D refused
AT	185	20	112	2
BE	290	31	179	3
CZ	270		1525	
DE	882	213	3320	349
EL	115 issued		9 issued	
FI	193			
FR	5449 issued		1628 issued	
IT	795 issued		227 issued	
PL	100 issued		778 issued	
RO	89 issued		1238 issued	
SE	267	70		
SK	26 issued		956 issued	
ES	480 issued		113 issued	
CH	436 issued			

This report has been compiled from the information provided EU Member States in Hanoi



31/01/2021

**LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ZAMBIA
2020 REPORT**

1. Introduction

There are six Schengen Member States Embassies present in Zambia: the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden. Norway closed its Embassy in 2016, but continues to participate in Local Schengen Cooperation (LSC) meetings with a representative from the Embassy in South Africa.

During the reporting period, four Member States' Embassies in Lusaka issued visas for a total of 24 Schengen countries:

Embassy of Germany	Austria, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia
Embassy of the Czech Republic	Czech Republic
Embassy of Italy	Greece, Italy, Malta, Slovakia
Embassy of Sweden	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland

2. LSC meetings held in 2020

In 2020, three LSC meetings were organized in January, May and June. The first meeting was still held physically in Lusaka, but following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia in March, both subsequent meetings were held virtually. After LSC coordination around the closure of the Schengen visa sections and for COVID-19 preparedness, no further meetings were necessitated in the second half of the year due to the evolution of the pandemic and the continuing travel ban of Zambian nationals to the EU.

The meetings were usually well attended by those Member States (MS) present in Zambia, with only one MS that very rarely attends. They were usually also joined by a representative from the Embassy of Norway in South Africa

All meetings were chaired by the EU Delegation that also prepared the meeting reports. There is no co-chair. There is no LSC coordination outside Lusaka, as all visa issues are exclusively dealt with in Lusaka.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

Regular meetings and contacts via e-mail, phone and virtual meeting platforms (Webex) continued to provide relevant opportunities for carrying out the tasks requested from the Local Schengen Cooperation under the Visa Code. The LSC meetings in particular dealt with operational issues in relation to the application of the common visa policy.

An exchange on the implementation of the new Visa Code (in application from 2 February 2020) took place at the meeting in January, but the MS did not foresee any specific problems. Since all group members suspended their visa activities after the introduction of the ban on non-essential travel to the Schengen area in March, no further discussion took place at the subsequent two meetings that focused on the impact of COVID-19.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Following the joint work of the LSC in 2015-2017, the harmonised list of supporting documents for Zambia entered into force on 29 September 2017. The implementation by MS has been jointly monitored and is regularly being discussed at LSC meetings. MS agree that the introduction of the harmonised list was a very positive step. There seems to be thus no need to amend the existing list for the time being.

c. Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

There were no attempts to harmonise the issuing of long-validity multiple-entry visas (MEVs), which constitute on average about 10-30% of the total numbers of Schengen visas issued in Zambia. One-year MEVs represent by far the biggest share of total MEVs, followed by two-year MEVs. Five-year MEVs are rare in the Zambian context.

d. Harmonisation of practices

Following the general closure of the visa sections in March, the LSC exchanged on a harmonised approach for the issuance of visas under the exemptions to the travel ban into the Schengen area (e.g. for health workers, family members of EU nationals). The group further discussed how to handle - once the travel ban would be lifted and visa sections would again be operational - visa applications by visa holders who had had to postpone their intended trip, in line with relevant guidelines received.

In June, a dedicated virtual meeting was held for an exchange on COVID-19 preparedness at the Embassies in the event of a lifting of the travel ban and subsequent re-opening of the visa sections on short notice.

e. Exchange of information

Until the suspension of visa activities due to COVID-19, the exchange of information within the LSC continued to be regular. Meetings and other contacts within the group provided a forum for information exchange, when relevant, on statistics and trends, cases of irregularities, travel medical

insurance etc. In the first three months after the suspension of activities in March, the LSC continued to provide a platform for exchange e.g. on COVID-19 preparedness.

Prior to COVID-19, the following issues were discussed in particular:

- Visa statistics and trends were discussed at the LSC meetings and information was compiled locally by the EU Delegation ahead of meetings;
- Fraud cases/'visa shopping' were discussed at the LSC meetings along regular exchanges on relevant trends, e.g. with regard to an increase in submissions of falsified or low-quality documents;
- An exchange on visa fees in the local currency took place at the LSC meetings and via email to take into account the fluctuation of the exchange rate EUR - Zambian Kwacha during parts of the reporting period;
- An updated list of representation arrangements was maintained by the EU Delegation, published on the EUD website and shared at each LSC meeting;
- Sharing of information received from EU HQ (e.g. centrally compiled visa statistics, the revision of the Visa Code and the Visa Code Handbook) was undertaken by the EU Delegation at LSC meetings, whenever applicable.
- VIS Mail: In response to a request from EU HQ, the group agreed on the 2nd of February 2020 as the date from which all members would use VIS Mail only for communication of applicant data.

f. Any other initiative taken in LSC

No other initiative was taken in the LSC group during the reporting period.

4. Challenges

Fraud and falsified documents: During the previous and current reporting periods, the LSC noticed an increase in numbers of submitted supporting documents that were either falsified or of very bad quality. Within the next reporting period, and once visa activities will resume, the LSC will continue to engage relevant local stakeholders to address this issue, e.g. the Department of Immigration (to work on the issue of falsified work and resident permits and birth certificates) and the main banks present in Zambia (to create awareness about the issue of falsified bank statements).

Increasing numbers of visa applications: The LSC visa sections have observed a trend of increasing numbers of visa applications already for a number of years. Going forward, and once visa activities resume, this could create a challenge for visa section staff. The LSC will continue to aim at addressing this issue by continuing the practice of dedicated meetings that include visa section staff in order to exchange on best practices and on efficient working methods that could alleviate the work burden.

5. Other issues

No other issues to be reported.

This report was drafted by the EU Delegation to Zambia in consultation with MS represented in the LSC.