EU/Timor-Leste Agreement: short-stay visa waiver

2015/0058(NLE) - 16/11/2015 - Committee report tabled for plenary, 1st reading/single reading

The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs adopted the report by Mariya GABRIEL (EPP, BG) on the draft Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Agreement between the European Union and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on the short-stay visa waiver.

The committee recommended the European Parliament to **give its consent** to the conclusion of the Agreement.

To recall, the Agreement signed on 26 May 2015 provides for **visa-free travel** for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of Timor-Leste when travelling to the territory of the other Contracting Party for **a maximum period of 90 days in any 180-day period**. The visa waiver covers all categories of persons (ordinary, diplomatic, service/official and special passport holders) travelling for all kinds of purposes, except for the purpose of carrying out a paid activity.

The report is accompanied by a short justification stating that this agreement on the waiver of short-stay visas simultaneously represents a **culmination of the deepening of relations** between the European Union and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste – which is politically highly significant in the context of the Cotonou Agreement – and is an **additional way of stepping up economic and cultural relations** and intensifying political dialogue on various issues, including human rights and fundamental freedoms.

- **In the economic sphere**, the agreement represents an opportunity to intensify economic relations and develop tourism. Tourism in particular is a key sector for the development of Timor-Leste, which may attract European citizens both as tourists and as investors. The EU currently ranks third among the trade partners of the Pacific countries, behind Australia and China. Despite that, the EU remains in sixth place in the league table of exporters to TimorLeste. The visa waiver is therefore an additional incentive for European entrepreneurs and investors.
- **As regards the political situation**, this agreement serves to enhance the position of the European Union as a partner of the countries in the Pacific region and with a view to the accession of Timor-Leste to ASEAN, with which the Union has announced the intention of stepping up its strategic partnership. The political dialogue between the European Union and Timor-Leste on this subject is concerned with human rights, freedom of the press and gender equality, particularly combating domestic violence.
- **As regards mobility**, the vast majority of Schengen visa applicants are regarded as travelling in good faith and not as presenting any risks, and they are therefore granted short-stay visas.

As regards the **implementation and monitoring of the agreement**, the rapporteur:

- called on the Commission to observe any developments in relation to the **criteria** regarding clandestine immigration, public policy and security, including, considerations relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- urged the Commission and the authorities of Timor-Leste to ensure **full reciprocity of the visa waiver**, which should permit equal treatment of all citizens, particularly all citizens of the Union;
- encouraged the Commission to **review the composition of the joint management committees** for future agreements to enable the European Parliament to be involved in the work of these committees.

Lastly, the rapporteur also queried the practice of signing visa waiver agreements and applying them provisionally before the European Parliament has approved them, a practice which is liable to reduce Parliament’s room for manoeuvre.