EU/Palau Agreement: short-stay visa waiver

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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 Republic of Palau on the short-stay visa waiver.

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

To recall, the Agreement signed on 7 December 2015 provides for visa-free travel for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of Palau 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 stipulating that this Agreement on the waiver of short-stay visas constitutes simultaneously represents a culmination of the deepening of relations between the European Union and Palau 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.

On an economic level, the Agreement could have positive effects by simplifying travel for businesspeople, facilitating investment and boosting tourism. Palau's economy is based primarily on the service sector, which accounts for 86 % of GDP, with a booming tourism sector, thanks also to the increase of the number of flights serving the island. Palau has one of the highest standards of living of the Pacific.

As regards investment and trade relations, these are currently unstable and low in terms of value and value and in relative terms, they have strong potential for development. The EU is currently negotiating Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with 14 Pacific countries, including Palau. Fishing, shellfish farming and tourism represent key development sector.

On a political level, Palau is a democratic republic completely committed to human rights, which are guaranteed under the Constitution. It has adopted legislation specifically relating to human trafficking and has become a member of the International Labour Organisation. The current political dialogue between the EU and Palau is focused on human rights and gender equality, and both parties are discussing how to collaborate more closely on these issues.

With regard to mobility, the information available indicates that confidence in visa applicants from Palau is high and that few visa applications are rejected, the rate of refusal of visas being low. In 2014, no nationals of Palau were arrested in the EU for being illegally resident, refused entry at the EU border or returned. No asylum applications were lodged by citizens of Palau. The country does not present any threat in terms either of irregular migration or of security and public policy.

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

- called on the Commission to observe any developments in relation to the criteria on clandestine immigration, public policy and security, but also the Union's external relations with the third countries concerned including, in particular, considerations relating to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- called on the Commission and the authorities of Palau 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 in order for the European Parliament to be involved in the work of the Joint Committee.

Lastly, the rapporteur queries the practice of signing visa waiver agreements and applying them provisionally before the European Parliament has approved them. This practice is liable to reduce Parliament's room for manoeuvre.