EU/Colombia 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 Colombia 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 2 December 2015 provides for visa-free travel for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of Colombia 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 marks a significant milestone in the deepening of relations between the EU and Colombia 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. The Agreement will also strengthen regional coherence, given that Colombia is one of the minority of Latin American countries whose nationals still need a visa.

On an economic level, Colombia is the EU's fourth most important economic partner in the region, with a trade volume of EUR 11 884 billion. The EU is Colombia's second trade partner. External trade represents around 20 % of GDP. The visa waiver will simplify conditions for travel by businesspeople, strengthen economic links among businesses and facilitate investments. Colombia is one of the most dynamic and open economies in the region. It is experiencing strong growth (+ 20 % growth between 2009 and 2013 and + 4% in 2014) owing to the scale of its natural and agricultural resources and the development of mining and hydrocarbon sectors, which are increasingly attracting investment. In this context, this agreement will make it possible to step up relations between the two parties and to impart fresh impetus to trade. In addition, the number of Colombian tourists in the EU has increased in the past years (increase of 5 % annually). A number of European companies have already invested heavily in tourist and hotel infrastructure. Visa liberalisation is likely to further increase tourist flows between the two, as well as investment in tourism.

On a political level, Colombia is one of the oldest recognised democracies and is relatively stable. The political dialogue between the EU and Colombia is based on the 1996 Rome Declaration, and a protocol signed in 2009. It is strengthened and institutionalised through the political dialogue and cooperation agreement concluded between the EU and the countries of the Andean Community. The visa facilitation agreement will make it possible to cooperate further in the field of human rights and to pursue a balanced, regular, in-depth political dialogue on more specific issues such as impunity, human rights defenders and security for women and children in armed conflicts, issues which remain priorities for the Union.

In terms of mobility, data regarding entry refusals, arrests and returns show that irregular migration is a risk factor. At the same time, however, a marked improvement regarding the situation in Colombia has been observed. In 2014, the vast majority of Schengen visa applicants were granted short-stay visas, the rejection rate being around 4.3 %, down by more than half since 2010. The return ratio has also significantly improved since 2010. The rapporteur notes the importance of enhancing the cooperation agreement between the EU and Colombia concerning irregular migration. The agreement also contains a

joint declaration on cooperation with regard to irregular immigration in which the EU and Colombia reaffirm their undertakings regard to the readmission of irregular migrants.

Colombia may also become a key partner in the field of **security and the fight against organised crime**, including drug trafficking, which can represent an important aspect of cooperation.

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 Colombia to ensure full reciprocity of the visa waiver, which should permit equal treatment of all citizens, particularly all citizens of the Union;
- encourage 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.