EU/Tonga 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 Kingdom of Tonga 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 20 November 2015 provides for visa-free travel for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of Tongo 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 constitutes simultaneously represents a culmination of the deepening of relations between the European Union and Tonga 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, Tonga's economy is based essentially on agriculture and fisheries (pumpkins and tuna), accounting for 20 % of GDP, and services, representing 60 % of GDP, including the progressively developing tourism sector.

As regards investment and trade relations, these are currently unstable and low in terms of value and value and in relative terms. The main products exported from this country are unprocessed agricultural products such as palm oil and sugar, and the main products imported are boats and ships, with a trade surplus for the Pacific. While EU trade relations with Tonga are relatively insignificant, they have strong potential for development. Moreover, Tonga has a large wind energy production capacity and 90 % of the 11th set of EDF appropriations for 2014-2020, amounting to EUR 11 million, is earmarked for renewable energy and energy efficiency.

On a political level, the Kingdom of Tonga has been a constitutional monarchy, since the first democratic elections in 2010. The EU's political dialogue with the various Pacific ACP countries and Tonga in particular is gradually increasing. Through a more structured dialogue, this Agreement may allow the EU to intensify our partnership, focusing on aspects such as abolition of the death penalty, combating violence against women and gender equality. The country has achieved considerable progress, as evidenced for example by the decision to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women. The visa exemption could send out a positive message of support for the country and the efforts it is making.

With regard to mobility, the information available indicates that confidence in visa applicants of Tonga is high and that few visa applications are rejected. In addition, migration flows have always been directed principally towards New Zealand, Australia and the United States and much less towards the EU. The country does not appear to present any threat in terms either of irregular migration, security or 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 Tongo 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.