EU/Kiribati 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 Kiribati on the short-stay visa waiver.

The committee recommended that Parliament **give its consent to conclusion of the agreement**.

To recall, the agreement provides for **visa-free travel** for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of Kiribati 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 agreement was signed on 23 June 2016 in Brussels. Since that date, the agreement has been applied provisionally.

The report is accompanied by a short justification stating that the agreement represents a culmination of the deepening of relations between the European Union and Kiribati - 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 economic terms**, the visa waiver agreement could have positive effects by simplifying travel for businesspeople, facilitating investment and boosting tourism. Kiribati's economy is largely based on agriculture, in particular fisheries, and on services, which account for 25% and 66% of GDP respectively. Investment and trade with Kiribati are currently low in terms of value and in relative terms. The EU is currently negotiating Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with 14 Pacific countries, including the Republic of Kiribati.
- **Politically,** the Government of Kiribati has made significant progress in honouring its international human rights obligations and achieving internationally laid down objectives, such as the Millennium Development Goals. Among the advances made, the adoption of the 2011-2021 action plan on eliminating sexual and gender-based violence in Kiribati should be noted . Accordingly, the agreement is a positive sign of support for the country, allowing us to pursue a balanced, regular and in-depth political dialogue on these issues, which remain priorities for the EU.
- **With regard to mobility**, the data available show that the visa refusal rate for Kiribati nationals is very low. However, it is complicated for them to make visa applications because Schengen Area countries' consulates are so far away. In 2014 and 2015, no nationals of Kiribati were arrested in the EU for being in an irregular situation, refused entry at the EU border or returned. Moreover, no asylum applications were lodged by citizens of Kiribati. The country does not therefore pose any threat in terms of irregular migration, migration flows, 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 issues of 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 Kiribati 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 so that Parliament might be involved in the work of the Joint Committee.

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