EU/Marshall Islands 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 Union, of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of the Marshall Islands on the short-stay visa waiver.

To recall, the agreement provides for **visa-free travel** for the citizens of the European Union and for the citizens of the Marshall Islandswhen 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 27 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 the Marshall Islands- 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. The economy of the Republic of Marshall Islands is based primarily on the service sector as well as some fishing and agriculture. The Marshall Islands has few natural resources and imports far exceed exports. While EU trade relations with the Republic of Marshall Islands are very limited, they have potential for development. The EU is currently negotiating a comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with fourteen Pacific countries, including the Republic of Marshall Islands. The Rapporteur notes that the visa waiver agreement reaffirms Union’s commitment to strengthen partnership with the country.
- **Politically,** the Marshall Islands is a stable presidential democracy in free association with the U.S. The Union's political dialogue with the Marshall Islands focuses on protecting its vulnerable environment, especially in relation to climate change on the one hand and on defending human rights and gender issues on the other hand. In this context, the agreement represents a significant step towards more regular and enhanced political dialogue.
- **With regard to mobility**, the information available indicates that confidence in visa applicants is high and the rate of refusal of visas is low. In 2014 and 2015, no nationals of the Marshall Islands were arrested for being illegally present in the EU and there has been no refusal of entry at the EU external border or return decision concerning Marshall Islands nationals. Furthermore, no asylum applications have been submitted by nationals of the Marshall Islands. In this context, the country does not represent any threat in terms either of irregular migration or of security and public order.

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 the Marshall Islands 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 queried 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.