EU/Solomon Islands Agreement: short-stay visa waiver

2016/0096(NLE) - 15/11/2016 - Committee report tabled for plenary, 1st reading/single reading

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 Solomon Islands 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 the Solomon Islands 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 7 October 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 Solomon 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.

As regards the economy, the visa waiver agreement could have positive effects by simplifying travel for businesspeople, facilitating investment and boosting tourism. Solomon Islands' economy is based essentially on agriculture, accounting for 50 % of its GDP, and services, representing almost 40 % of its GDP. While European Union trade relations with Solomon Islands are very limited, they have potential for development. The European Union is currently negotiating a comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with fourteen Pacific countries, including Solomon Islands.

Politically, Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy within the Commonwealth since 1978. The European Union's political dialogue with the Solomon 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. The visa waiver agreement represents a significant step towards more regular and enhanced political dialogues.

As regards 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 Solomon Islands were arrested for being illegally present in the European Union and no refusal of entry at the European Union external border or return decisions were taken concerning Solomon Islands nationals. Furthermore, no asylum applications have been submitted by nationals of Solomon Islands. In this context, the country does not represent any threat in terms of either 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 Tuvalu 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.