The European Union and the region of Kaliningrad

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PURPOSE : to propose a set of measures to ease transit after enlargement. CONTENT : the European Commission adopted a Communication setting out a package of measures designed to ease the direct transit of people and goods between Kaliningrad oblast and the rest of Russia once the enlargement of the EU has taken place. The European Council in Seville on 21 June invited the European Commission to submit, in time for the 24-25 October European Council in Brussels, an additional study on the possibilities for an effective and flexible solution of the transit of persons and goods to and from Kaliningrad oblast, in compliance with the acquis and in agreement with the candidate countries concerned. The package foresees : 1) the provision of a Facilitated Transit Document: the Commission proposes the introduction of a special Facilitated Transit Document (FTD), issued to those Russian citizens who need to travel frequently to and from Kaliningrad. This securised document would be issued at low cost by candidate country consulates after examination of lists provided by the Russian authorities. It would allow individuals short periods in which to transit their territory by road or rail. For those Russian citizens who are not yet in possession of an internationally valid passport, the FTD could be considered valid when accompanied by a Russian internal travel document for a short transition period (of up to the end of 2004); 2) assessing the feasibility of non-stop high-speed trains that could provide sufficient security for visa-free travel: Russia has proposed to introduce a visa exemption for direct transit of passengers on non-stop high-speed trains, linking Kaliningrad with the rest of Russia passing through Lithuania and Belarus. The Commission considers that the technical preconditions for the safe and secure operation of visa-free travel by trains do not at this stage exist - trains and tracks would need to be upgraded and the Lithuanian authorities would need to be in a position to refuse entry and carry out controls during transit. After accession of Lithuania the EU is ready to examine the legal and technical feasibility of visa-free non-stop trains. 3) opening discussion on a long-term goal of ultimate visa-free travel between Russia and the EU : the EU should examine the Russian proposal to open discussions on defining the conditions necessary for the eventual establishment of a visa-free travel regime. This discussion offers an opportunity to discuss the measures which Russia is putting in place to strengthen the rule of law, to intensify the fight against organised crime, to ensure border security and that travel documents are secure and accurate. At the same time, the EU is keen to increase co-operation on border management, which are essential to tackling trans-border crime and illegal migration as well as preventing the free movement of criminal and terrorist elements. The EU expects Russia to agree to the early conclusion of readmission agreements with the candidate countries and the EU itself. 4) making full use of international conventions for simplified transit of goods : the TIR (road) and COTIF (rail) conventions already allow for the transit of goods with relatively little bureaucracy. The parties to the Conventions may also adoptsimplified procedures for transit by rail, for example by accepting existing Russian documentation. The EU/Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to which the candidate countries will accede after enlargement already ensures the free movement of goods between Russia and Kaliningrad across the Community without customs duties or any other transit duties other than charges for transport and administration. The question of cross-border traffic between Kaliningrad and neighbouring countries that does not involve onward travel to the Russian mainland (small border traffic) is being examined separately in the Council on the basis of a working paper of the Commission services, since this is a horizontal question relating to the whole of the EU's external border.