Visas: facilitating procedures for members of the Olympic family taking part in the 2004 Games in Athens

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PURPOSE: To present a Report to the European Parliament and Council on the functioning of the derogation system to facilitate the procedures for issuing visas during the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Athens.

CONTENT: The 2004 Olympic Games in Athens were the first such games organised by a Member State participating in the Schengen Agreement. As a host country, Greece was obliged to honour an Olympic obligation whereby participants to the Olympic and Paralympic Games have a right to access their territory. To allow Greece to fulfil both this, and its Schengen obligations, the EU adopted specific measures, facilitating the issuing of Schengen visas to Olympic participants. Those provisions were set out in EU Regulation 1295/2003. The objective of the Regulation was to offer user friendly procedures when applying for and issuing visas for those taking part in the 2004 Athens Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Under the terms of Regulation 1295/2003, the Commission is obliged (based on a statement from the Greek authorities) to prepare a Report on the functioning of the derogations system in time for the Olympic Winter Games, which will take place in Turin in 2006. Much of the information and detail discussed by the Commission stems from an exhaustive and precise account forwarded by the Greek authorities to the Commission in February 2005.

Specifically speaking, Regulation 1295/2003 sought to achieve its objectives by providing a collective application for participants via the Olympic accreditation system. Other provisions included simplifying supporting documents as well as allocating visas a special number attached to the Olympic accreditation card. The derogation system was in place only for the duration of the Athens 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games and was based on a list of participants who had been selected to take part in the Games. The IOC and ATHOC-ATHENS (the Organising Committee of the Olympic Games) were responsible for issuing accreditation cards.

In accordance with the Regulation's provisions, the Greek authorities set up a number of features to help in the smooth running of the derogation procedure. Such measures included, *inter alia*, :

- The setting up of an Olympic Consulate as a special service under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to examine the applications and approve visas for participants. It functioned from 01/01/2004 to 30 /10/2004 and was staffed with permanent officials of the MFA and located in the ATHOC-ATHENS building. Its task was to receive the visa applications in electronic format. A specific computer software programme was used for the transmission of the application forms to the competent authorities for controlling records in SIS and, where necessary, the consultation of central authorities of other Member States in conformity with the Common Consular Instruction rules.

- Preparing an 'Accreditation Handbook', in which all of the visa application procedures were spelt out. The handbook was sent to all relevant organisations in advance of submitting lists. The procedure for forwarding visa applications, together with requests for an accreditation card were outlined in the 'Accreditation Card Manual'.

- Forming a network of contacts with Schengen embassies in Athens (co-ordination meetings, exchanging information)

- Establishing a communication network with links to Schengen partner capitals, police and border authorities.

- Creating a 24 hour call centre available from July 2004 until the end of the derogation period in 2004. This service offered direct information on the issuance of visas for participants. This service acted as an effective communication link between border control posts and the Olympic consulate.

- Creating a website on the Internet providing real-time access to Schengen partner services. A special code had to be entered to obtain further information on visa applications and any cancellations.

On other issues, such as document security, the Report suggests that the Olympic accreditation cards issued in 2004 met the highest standards – at least equivalent to those for uniform format for visas. The document encompassed both visible and non-visible optical and physical security features, photograph protection and personal data fields.

The total number of applications received from Members of the Olympic and Paralympic family was 77 230. Ultimately, the number of those accredited and who used their accreditation card were 53 168. Of these 13 077 were visa-requiring third country nationals – so approximately 25%. For Olympic participants, the derogation was valid for 78 days whereas for Paralympic participants the derogation period was set at 72 days. Some journalists and other media related persons were accredited for both games for a no violation of the 90-day rule.

In cases where a participant failed to fulfil certain conditions or if another Schengen State voiced objections during the consultation procedure, the Greek authorities refused the issuing of a uniform Schengen visa for the person concerned. The Greek authorities mentioned 19 cases of refusals during the whole derogation period due to SIS registration

In terms of problems encountered with the implementation of the Regulation, the Greek authorities recorded that, by and large, implementation went smoothly, noting that the provisions in the Regulation proved to be both effective and flexible allowing for a smooth application of the Olympic Chapter, without compromising Schengen area security. Nevertheless, a certain number of issues were raised in their report. Namely,:

- Cases where athletes participated in the Games with a country flag that was different from the country which issued their passport – such as the Dutch Antilles and the British Virgin Islands.

- Participants holders of Residence permits issued by a Schengen State

- Double accreditation.

- Validity of passports.

- Extension of the duration of the say in the common area VTL for persons listed in the SIS.

- Visa ban lists

To conclude, on the basis of information submitted by the Greek authorities, the Commission services are of the opinion that the derogation system for the issuing visas by a Schengen participant who is hosting the Olympic games was successful. Based on the experience of the first derogation, the Commission

proposes that it be applied to the issuing of visas for the winter Olympic games in Turin with certain modifications aimed at improving its overall functionality.