

Ukraine's Road to Visa-Free Travel to the EU

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Over the last few years, the European Union has been a top priority in Ukraine's foreign policy. This was evident in 2000 when the country adopted its *EU Integration Strategy of Ukraine*, later reinforced in 2004 when Viktor Yushenko came to power. This same sentiment is still present with the current President, Yanukovich, who declared this past August 24th to a crowd of 2,000 people gathered in Kiev's *Independence Square* that "European integration continues to be a priority for Ukraine's foreign policy". It is important to keep in mind that Yanukovich's first foreign trip had been to Brussels last March 2010.

We cannot deny therefore that the relationship between the European Union and Ukraine has made a qualitative leap forward. However, within the European integration and visa liberalisation processes, political declarations must be translated into serious political commitments. The evaluations carried out by EU/Ukraine Action Plan experts reveal that only 11 of the 73 items foreseen have been carried out thus far.

This only underscores that much work is still left to be done. Ukraine has to carry out the political, economic and institutional reforms, which will lead to specific results and bring the country closer to fulfil European standards. Fighting against insecurity, political instability and corruption and controlling its borders would portray a positive image within the European Union institutions and strengthen mutual trust between both. The reforms will also reinforce Ukraine's World Trade Organization membership- with much more potential and benefits for Ukraine than any other association.

That notwithstanding, not all the work yet to be done corresponds to Ukraine. The European Union can act as an anchor to encourage and accelerate the reforms Ukraine needs to implement. Commitment from the EU, providing technical and financial assistance, is also key. Visa-free travel would represent a major incentive for Ukraine to adopt the structural reforms demanded; it would also enable the country to invigorate its tourism industry, manage its borders and combat cross-border crime and mafias.

At the present time, only 4% of visa requests from Ukrainian citizens are rejected; one of the lowest percentages within the EU. According to official statistics for 2009, Ukraine receives nearly 9, 2% of all visas issued by the EU, ranking second after Russia (29, 4%). This demonstrates two key points: 1) The majority of visa requests presented are accepted, and 2) the EU is predisposed to continue working towards liberalising visas with Ukraine.

A prosperous and stable Ukraine is of interest to both Ukraine and the EU. The next EU-Ukraine summit scheduled for November 22nd should serve to instil optimism between both parties and to move forward on visa liberalisation.

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