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ANALYSIS OF RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF EU VISA LIBERALIZATION FOR GEORGIA

Policy Paper

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ANALYSIS OF THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE EU VISA LIBERALIZATION FOR GEORGIA

The European Union's decision to grant Georgia a visa-free access to the EU/Schengen area is a significant step forward for the country and a major political, economic and social milestone on its path towards European integration, one which has opened up vital new opportunities for Georgian citizens.

The Policy Paper looks into potential benefits of visa liberalization and likely challenges that can hamper the efficient implementation of the visa-free movement scheme between Georgia and the EU/Schengen countries.

Introduction

On 29 December 2016 the Parliament of Georgia unanimously approved a foreign policy resolution¹ declaring European integration a national strategic objective.

On 1 March 2017 the European Union amended Regulation (EC) No. 539/2001 as a result of which Georgia has joined those countries which enjoy visa free travel with EU/Schengen states. Since 28 March 2017 Georgian citizens with biometric passports are allowed to enter the EU/Schengen area visa free for short visits meaning that they can spend up to 90 days in any 180-day period, for business, tourist or family purposes.

The association and visa liberalization agreements with the EU have granted Georgians greater opportunity to benefit from all of the EU's four fundamental freedoms – the free movement of goods, services, capital and people.² This is a significant factor

that can greatly contribute to the country's sustainable development.

To secure visa-free status, the Georgian government implemented a package of wide-range sectoral reforms, as required by the EU-Georgia visa liberalization action plan (VLAP), which were designed to incorporate best international practices and experience. Despite the progress in all VLAP benchmarks, some remaining problems are yet to be addressed so that the visa-free regime is not compromised and hampered.

In view of the above mentioned factors, this Policy Paper aims to provide complex assessment and analysis of potential risks and challenges to effective visa-free movement, as well as to identify existing barriers and develop response mechanisms.

The Policy Paper outlines potential outcomes of the visa liberalization for Georgian citizens and provides statistical data

¹ Parliament of Georgia, Resolution on Georgia's foreign policy (December 2016). Available in Georgian at: <http://www.parliament.ge/en/ajax/downloadFile/53452/Resolution>:

² Author's note: despite the visa-free travel arrangement, restrictions on labor migration remain in place, which means that Georgians will not be able to fully benefit from the fourth principle.

pertaining to migration flows from Georgia to the EU/Schengen countries. In addition, the paper looks at international experience of the EU/Schengen visa-free movement and offers recommendations for Georgian authorities.

Research methodology

The Policy Paper is based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including desk research and analysis of the agreements signed within the framework of the EU-Georgia visa liberalization dialogue, and international and local research reports on achievements and expected outcomes of visa liberalization.

To ensure an accurate and comprehensive assessment of all visa-related aspects, interviews were carried out with representatives of the office of the state minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the ministry of foreign affairs, the secretariat of the governmental commission for migration, and non-governmental organizations.

To accurately identify and assess potential obstacles to the visa liberalization, a substantial amount of statistical data was analysed during the research, including the EU and Georgian visa statistics and migration- and security-related indicators.

Within the framework of the GYLA-CIPDD joint project, CRRC-Georgia carried out a quantitative public opinion survey based on multi-level stratified cluster sampling. As Georgian was the only language of instruction for the survey, constituencies with more than 40% of non-Georgian population were excluded from the sampling. In each sampled constituency, 20 households were randomly selected for the survey. The sampled constituencies were clustered into

three strata: Tbilisi, other urban settlements, and rural communities.

International practice and experience of EU/Schengen visa-free mobility was examined using comparative analysis of the cases of Western Balkan countries and Moldova. The benefits and challenges of visa liberalization for these countries were assessed and analysed.

Based on the findings of the research, recommendations were prepared for the Georgian government on how to best respond to the challenges and risks identified during the research.

Visa liberalization timeline

Before agreeing the VLAP, Georgia and the EU signed agreements on visa facilitation and readmission of unauthorized persons, which took effect in 2011. The EU Visa Code, effective from 2009, establishes the procedures and conditions for issuing short-term visas for the EU countries.

The visa facilitation agreement (VFA) eased administrative formalities, shortened the time for reviewing visa applications and reduced related costs. It also entailed some other significant changes, which simplified visa requirements and made it easier for Georgian citizens to travel to the EU/Schengen countries.

The EU Visa Code regulates such key aspects as accessibility of visa-related information, quality of service, language, substantiation of rejection, possibility to appeal the rejection etc.

Findings of research projects³ monitoring the implementation of the VFA and the EU Visa Code have provided strong evidence of noticeable progress and confirmed that

³ Liberal Academy Tbilisi, Free Movement towards European Integration (February 2016). Available at: <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/free%20movement%20toward%20%20european%20integration.pdf>

EU/Schengen visas have become much accessible for Georgian citizens. However, the body of research has also revealed complex problems related to the quality of the EU consular services, accessibility of information, and processing time for visa applications.

The EU-Georgia agreement on the bilateral readmission of persons residing without authorization⁴ aims at facilitating closer and stronger cooperation between the EU and Georgia to prevent and combat irregular migration and ensure safe readmission of persons from the EU into Georgia and vice versa.

The readmission agreement (RA) defines responsibilities of the parties and administrative/procedural regulations for the organized return of persons who fail to meet requirements for entering, residing and/or traveling to Georgia or an EU member state.

The RA-regulated readmission procedure is applicable to any unauthorized person, be a country's own citizen, a third country national or a stateless person. It is noteworthy that EU-Georgia cooperation on readmission has been widely acclaimed, including by international experts, as highly successful and exemplary.

Although readmission applications from the EU member states to Georgia are growing every year, the number of applications rejected by Georgia has been steadily falling since 2013 and reached an all-time low of 1.7% in 2016 (Table 1).

Effective implementation of the VFA and RA paved the way for the EU-Georgia VLAP, which was approved in February 2013.

The VLAP consisted of two phases (legislative and implementation) during which the European Commission administered four assessment reports. During the first phase Georgia was tasked to harmonise the national legislation in respective fields with the EU standards, while the second phase envisaged the implementation of the legislation.

The European Commission's final progress report emphasized that "The progress achieved by Georgia over the last three years in all areas covered by the four blocks of the VLAP is steady and effective... The legislative and policy framework comply with European and international standards".

As a result of reforms implemented by the Georgian government and on the basis of the EU's consistent monitoring efforts, the EC released its fourth progress report on 18 December 2015 on the implementation of the VLAP by Georgia, concluding that Georgia had met all the VLAP benchmarks.

The European Commission's final report highlights the country's achievements: "The progress achieved by Georgia over the last three years in all areas covered by the four blocks of the VLAP is steady and effective... The legislative and policy framework, the institutional and organizational principles, and the implementation of procedures throughout the four blocks comply with European and international standards".

Table 1. Readmission statistics, 2011-2016. (Readmission applications from the EU)

	2011			2012			2013			2014			2015			2016		
	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected	Rec-eived	Acc-epted	Rej-ected
Total number	612	548	9.9%	984	929	5.5%	1182	1080	8.6%	1253	1181	5.7%	1324	1265	4.4%	1628	1600	1.7%

⁴ Official Journal of the European Union, AGREEMENT between the European Union and Georgia on the readmission of persons residing without authorization (February, 2011). Available at: <http://migration.commission.ge/files/readmission.pdf>

The VLAP covered a set of complex activities prompting a series of legislative and institutional reforms in the following areas:

- document security, including biometrics;
- integrated border management, migration management and asylum policy;
- public order and security;
- external relations and fundamental rights.

To comply with the VLAP requirements, Georgia has made more than 60 legislative amendments, adopted more than 70 normative acts, instructions and regulations, and nine national strategies, and ratified seven international conventions.⁵

The fourth progress report also stressed that the Commission will continue to closely monitor and further support progress that Georgia has achieved by using various formats. It is believed that dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Georgia in each of these formats have moved up to an advanced stage.

Amid the growing influx of migrants and refugees into the EU, the European Union's visa liberalization dialogue with a number of countries, including Georgia, has triggered a heated internal debate. The European migrant crisis has recently evolved into one of the biggest challenges for the EU, creating serious and complex problems for its member states.

Following intense and wide-ranging discussions, the European Council and the European Parliament reached an agreement on a revised version of the suspension mechanism⁶ which has a potential to become

an important instrument for the migration management for the EU member states. The swift suspension mechanism will be discussed in detail below.

Following the positive assessment of the progress report and taking into account overall EU-Georgia relations, on 9 March 2016 the European Commission presented a legislative proposal to the European Council and the European Parliament. On 2 February 2017 The European Parliament voted on the endorsement the visa waiver for Georgia. With 553 votes against 66 members of the European Parliament endorsed the visa liberalisation with Georgia and subsequent changes to Regulation 539/2001. As a result of this development Georgia joined countries with visa-free travel arrangements with the EU. The visa-free regime came into force on 28 March 2017. Since that day, Georgian citizens have been able to travel to the EU/Schengen countries without visas.

Visa suspension mechanism

The inflow of migrants into the European Union was on a steady increase year by year in 2010-2016, reaching its apex in 2015, when an estimated 1,322,825 refugees, dislodged by wars and conflicts in the Middle East, especially the civil war in Syria, crossed EU borders (figure 1). Importantly, Germany, Sweden and Hungary are the most popular immigration destinations among the EU member states.⁷

The European Union doubled its migration and asylum funding in 2015 and 2016, committing a total of 10.1 billion EURO to respond to the refugee crisis,⁸ including 3.9

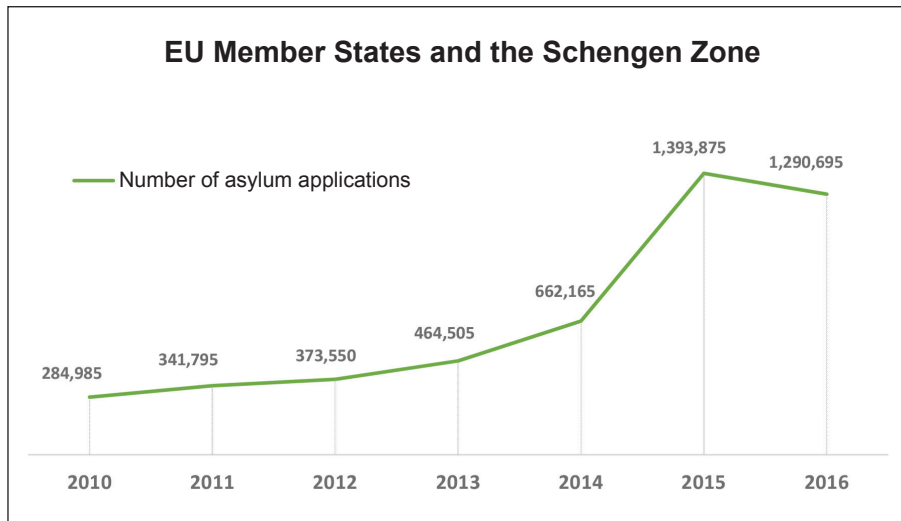
⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, news: The European Commission released the fourth – and the final – progress report (December 2015) on the implementation of the visa liberalization action plan (VLAP) by Georgia, Available in Georgian at: <https://goo.gl/qz8LiN>

⁶ Council of the EU, PRESS RELEASE: Visa suspension mechanism: Council confirms agreement with Parliament (December 2016). Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/pressreleasespdf/2016/12/47244651789_en.pdf

⁷ Eurostat, Asylum and managed migration, (Accessed: February, 2017). Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/data/database>

⁸ European Commission, EU budget for the refugee crisis, (2015). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/eu_budget_for_the_refugee_crisis_20160210_en.pdf

Figure 1.



Source: Eurostat, 25.02.2017

billion EURO for measures inside the EU and 6.2 billion EURO outside the EU.

In order to be able to respond effectively to the migration challenges, the EU adopted a new regulation to revise the suspension mechanism, which can be applied to all existing visa liberalization agreements with third countries in cases where the rules are not being respected. The revised suspension mechanism was enacted in 2013 but has not yet been applied in practice. The new regulation is designed to ensure a timely and efficient response in case of a substantial increase in the migration-related risk to the member states.

Internal discussions in the EU over the new suspension mechanism hampered and delayed the visa waiver for Georgia, as in the context of existing migration risks some EU member states insisted on revising the suspension mechanism as a precondition for their endorsement of the visa liberalization for third countries.

The amended Regulation 539/2001, which introduced the suspension mechanism, has extended the possible grounds for suspension of the visa-free regime. Under the new

rules, visa exemptions for nationals of a third country can be temporarily suspended in the following circumstances:

- 1) a substantial increase in the number of nationals of that third country refused entry or found to be staying in the member state's territory without a right thereto;
- 2) a substantial increase in the number of asylum applications from the nationals of that third country;
- 3) a substantial increase in the refusal rate of readmission applications submitted by the member state to that third country;
- 4) an increased risk or imminent threat to the public policy or internal security of member states, related to nationals of that third country.

In the event of the violation of the conditions outlined above, a member state may notify the EC and submit respective justification afterwards. The EC should examine the circumstances and makes a decision together with the European Parliament and the

Council immediately in one-month period on whether or not to suspend the visa-free regime with the third country in question. If the suspension mechanism is triggered, it will apply to the entire EU/Schengen territory.

Under the new regulations, the EC can adopt an implementing act temporarily suspending the exemption from the visa requirement for nationals of the third country for a period of nine months (six months previously). During the period of suspension, the EC will establish an enhanced dialogue with the third country concerned with a view to remedying the circumstances in question. However, if these circumstances persist, the EC can extend the suspension for a further period of 18 months and indefinitely afterwards.

It is worth noting that a period to monitor the post-visa liberalisation period in the third country has been reduced from six to two months. The circumstances leading to the suspension with the situation during the previous year or before visa liberalization from six to two months. This means that if one of the four above-described suspension criteria is in place, the visa-free regime can be suspended.

Importantly, the reference period and the procedure for suspension have also been changed. According to the new version, the EC will be able to initiate and eventually make a decision within a month from the originally defined three months.

With the new rules, the EC will be able to launch the suspension procedure in a faster

and simplified manner, control the adherence to visa requirements more effectively and improve oversight of migration flows..

Expectations and awareness of visa liberalization in Georgia

According to the 5 November 2014 census, Georgia's total population is 3,713,804 residents. The total number of migrants is 88.5 thousand with 71,206 of them having valid residence permits in the EU member countries and currently residing in EU territory, according to Eurostat 2015 data.⁹ The most Georgian migrants live in Greece (15.9%), Italy (10.9%) and Germany (7.1%).

The visa-free regime provides Georgian citizens with an opportunity to enter the EU/Schengen area, except Ireland and the UK, without a visa and stay – and move freely across Schengen countries for up to 90 days.

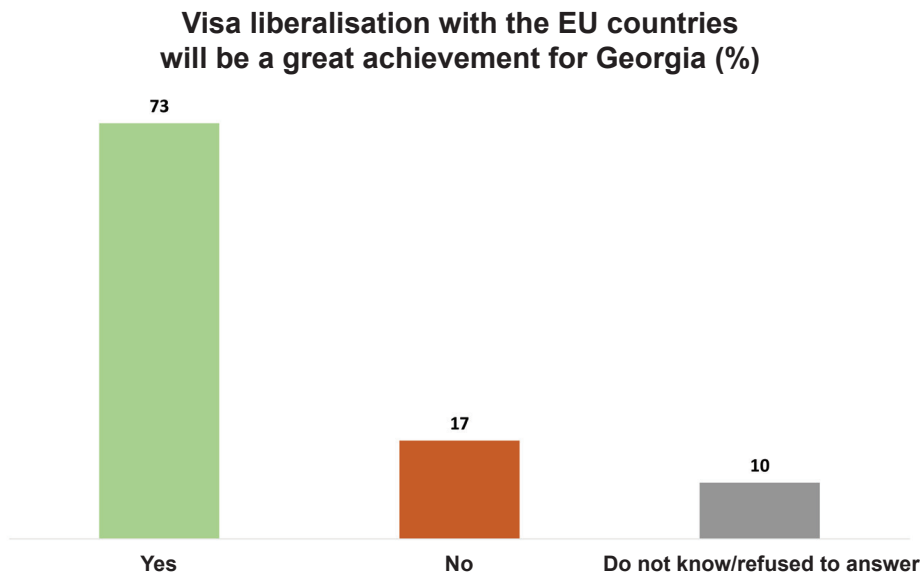
Public opinion and expectations of the EU/Schengen visa liberalization are highly positive and the visa-free travel deal has strong backing in Georgia.

According to the CRRC-Georgia's January 2017 public opinion survey, 73% of the respondents welcomed the visa liberalization and considered it a significant achievement (figure 2).

Schengen area	
EU member countries of the Schengen area	Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Estonia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Greece, France, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Finland, Sweden, Czech Republic.
Non-EU members of the Schengen area	Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, Switzerland.
EU member countries/candidates for Schengen area	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania, Croatia.

⁹ Eurostat, Asylum and managed migration, (Accessed: February, 2017). Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/data/database>

Figure 2.



Source: CRRC-Georgia, public opinion survey, January 2017.

According to the public opinion survey, 31% of those polled thought the visa liberalization would offer employment opportunities in the EU countries, though in fact the visa-free status does not entitle Georgian citizens for a job in the EU. It is, therefore, extremely important to ensure proper communication to prevent the Georgian population from feeling frustrated and sceptical about the benefits of the European integration.

The findings of the survey have revealed that TV and social networks (72% and 22% respectively) are the major source for information on documents and procedures pertaining to traveling to the EU countries for the majority of Georgian population. That is why the information campaign should prioritize just these media.

According to the survey results, 33% of the respondents believe that every Georgian willing to travel to the eligible countries, will be able to cross the border to the EU without any obstacle, while 57% contemplate that visa-free arrangements cannot guarantee that every citizen of Georgia may enter the EU without any obstacle..

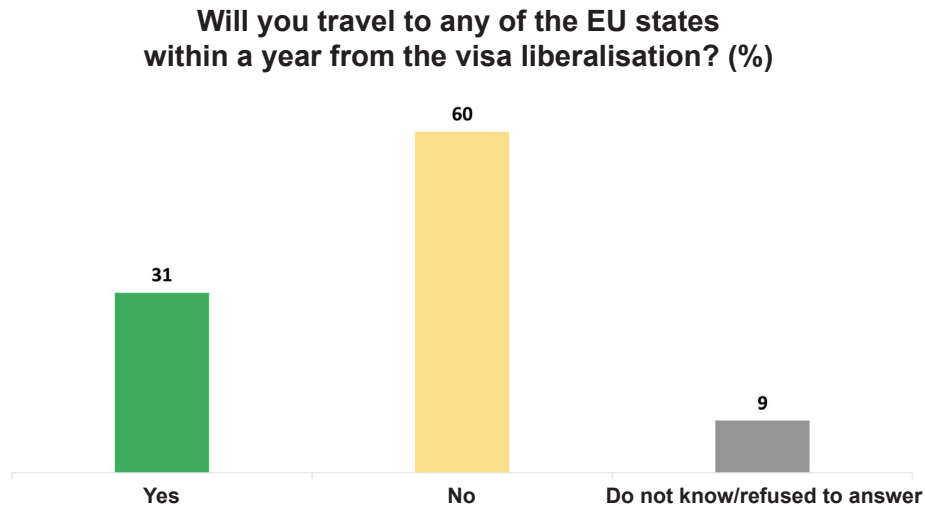
According to the public opinion survey, 31% of respondents believe that the visa liberalization will offer employment opportunities in the EU countries, though in fact the visa-free status does not entitle Georgian citizens to work in the EU. It is, therefore, extremely important to ensure proper communication to prevent the Georgian population from feeling frustrated and sceptical, which may in turn undermine the support to European integration in Georgia.

According to the CRRC-Georgia's survey, almost every third Georgian citizen plans to travel to one of the EU member country within a year of the start of the visa-free movement (Figure 3).

This figure is several times higher than an average annual number of the EU visas issued to Georgian citizens for the past year (in 2015 consulates/embassies of the EU member countries in Georgia issued a total of 87,043 visas).¹⁰ It is a clear indication that the removal of visa requirements can greatly increase people's motivation to visit the EU.

¹⁰ European commission, Visa policy, 16. 03. 2017. The document is available here

Figure 3.



Source: CRRC-Georgia, public opinion survey, January 2017.

A survey¹¹ conducted by the IRI in February-March 2017 found that 97% of respondents were aware of the EU visa liberalization for Georgia.

This statistical data demonstrate that the introduction of the visa-free regime with the EU is a subject of popular discussions. However, various public opinion polls suggest that many Georgians are still not fully aware of all the conditions and requirements of visa-free travel.

Significant findings were reported by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in its country-wide study "Generation in Transition – Youth Study Georgia – 2016"¹² focusing on Georgian youth from 14 to 29 years old.

Recent public opinion polls and studies have demonstrated that even though the introduction of the visa-free regime with the EU is widely discussed in Georgia, many are not fully aware of all the conditions and requirements of visa-free travel.

According to the findings of the study, Georgian youth have quite a strong desire to leave their home country (figure 4). Almost every fifth respondent (21%) said that they had a very strong desire to migrate, and almost the same number (19%) indicated that they would consider leaving the country. It is noteworthy that the share of those who don't want to emigrate is higher among older respondents, and especially among those who live in the countryside.

The USA and Germany are ranked as the top two the most desired destinations (27% and 21% respectively) among those willing to leave the country. The top seven preferred countries for emigration include five EU member states – almost half of the respondents wanted to travel to these countries.

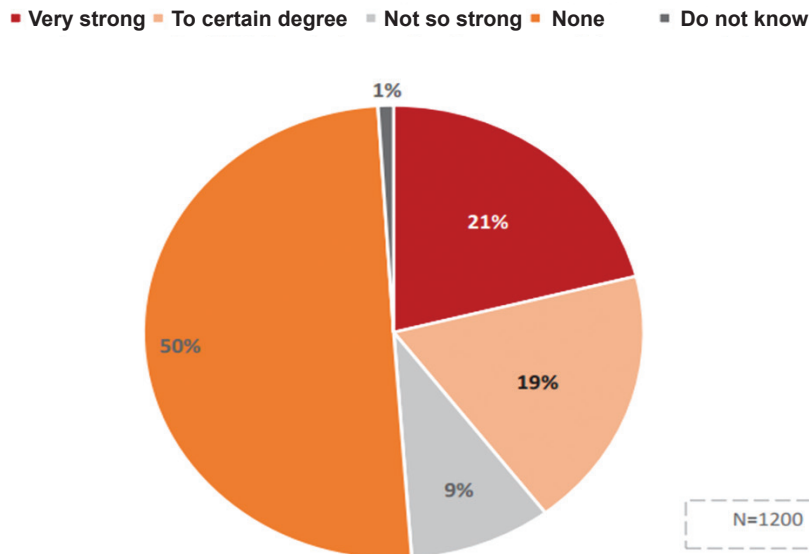
As for the motivating factors for migration, better living standards top the list (38%) followed by better educational (17%) and employment (13%) opportunities.

The study revealed that Georgian youth are not properly informed about the conditions

¹¹ IRI – Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia, 22 February –8 March 2017. Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf

¹² Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "Generation in Transition – Youth Study Georgia – 2016", 2016, Georgia (January 2017). Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/13150.pdf>

Figure 4. Desire to migrate



Source: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, “Generation in Transition – Youth Study Georgia – 2016”

of the EU visa-free movement and believe that after Georgia is granted the visa-free status, it will be simple for them to move to European countries to study or work.

In August 2015 the Georgian government launched a targeted information campaign, a video guide to the EU/Schengen visa liberalization.¹³ The guide explains in detail the conditions and terms of the visa liberalization, but this campaign has a relatively limited scale and scope. However, from March 2017, the government has greatly intensified its information activities related to the EU/Schengen visa-free regime.

According to Archil Karaulashvili, first deputy minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration,¹⁴ the government sought to avoid encouraging excessively high expectations among the Georgian public until the European Union made its final political decision about the visa liberalization for Georgia. But once the European Parliament endorsed the visa waiver for the country, the government would launch a comprehensive nation-wide information campaign.

Analysis of the current situation underscores the importance of a sustained wide-reaching information campaign to clarify the rights and obligations pertaining to the EU visa-free travel for Georgians. It is strategically significant to maintain the scale and intensity of the campaign before as well as after the visa-free status is granted to ensure adequate public awareness of the visa-related issues.

Simultaneous with the start of the EU/Schengen visa-free regime, it is vital to manage the Georgian public’s expectations to prevent a rapid rise of migration flows and/or large-scale violations of the visa-free regulations, which can endanger the visa-free movement and fuel Eurosceptical sentiments.

Simultaneously with the start of the EU/Schengen visa-free regime, it is vital to manage the Georgian public’s expectations to prevent a rapid rise of migration flows and/or large-scale violations of the visa-free

¹³ The ministry of foreign affairs of Georgia, The guide to the EU visa-free movement, 2016, Available in Georgian at: <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/visa-free-guide.aspx>

¹⁴ Interview with Archil Karaulashvili, first deputy minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, Tbilisi, 12.01.2017.

regulations, which can endanger the visa-free movement and fuel Eurosceptical sentiments.

The Georgia-EU visa and migration portfolio

Along with other Eastern Partnership countries, Georgia is one of the participants of the European Union's Integrated Border Management (IBM) Capacity Building Project,¹⁵ which expanded and intensified in 2014-2017. The following are among the goals the project aims to achieve through various complex activities: to improve the process of border crossing for passengers, traders and freight; to enhance operational capacities; and to create a modern training system according to EU best practices.

The Eastern Partnership risk analysis report¹⁶ of the Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) highlights a range of key indicators that allow the EU to assess and plan the border management policies of the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia.

To ensure that the country benefits from EU visa liberalization to the full possible extent, it is pivotal to properly and consistently analyse and assess different sectors that can potentially have an impact on these indicators.

Once a visa-free regime with third countries takes effect, the EU will apply a complex post-visa liberalization monitoring and assessment scheme, which makes it possible to quickly identify any emerging challenge and make a political decision to suspend the visa-free status of any third country in case of serious and repeated violations.

The visa suspension mechanism serves as an additional instrument to respond to the ongoing migration crisis in the EU. It should be of great importance to Georgian residents as the adherence to visa rules will lead to the maximised benefits of visa-free movement.

The Policy Paper highlights several key directions, which Georgia must address and which can have a major impact on the visa liberalization. One of these issues concerns visa statistics and border crossing data between Georgia and the EU member states.

Among these indicators, the following ones are given close attention:



¹⁵ The Eastern Partnership (EaP) Integrated Border Management (IBM) Capacity Building Project (2014). Available at: <http://www.eap-ibm-capacitybuilding.eu/en/about/project>

¹⁶ European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Eastern Partnership Risk Analysis Network Quarterly, (October 2016). Available at: http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/EaP_RAN/EaP_Q2_2016.pdf

The European Union is one of the most attractive destinations for Georgian citizens. According to the latest available data, an increasing number of Georgians applied for short-stay EU/Schengen visas in recent years. For instance, 83,848 short-stay visas were issued to Georgian citizens in 2015, including 21,987 (26.2%) multiple entry visas. In 2016 the number of short-stay visas totalled 89,592, including 29,601 (33%) multiple entry visas (Figure 5).¹⁷

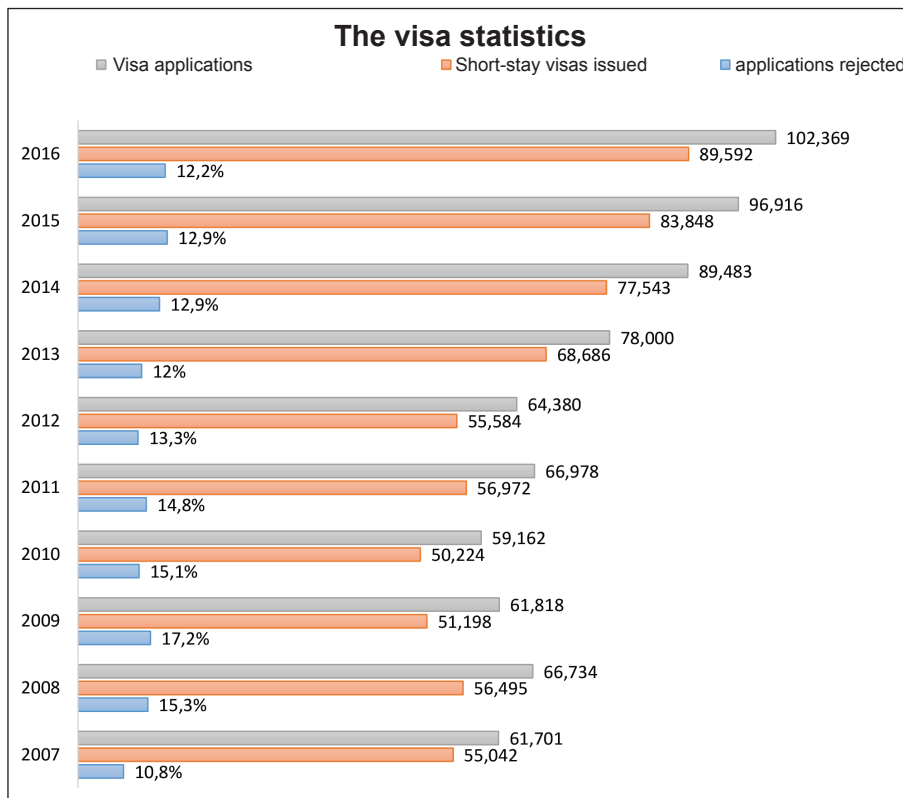
Despite the rise in the number of visas issued, visa refusals for Georgian citizens remain consistently high. The average refusal rate for short-stay visa applications from Georgian citizens was 12.2% in 2016, almost twice higher than the EU/Schengen average of 6.9% for that year.

The visa suspension mechanism serves as an additional instrument to respond to the ongoing migration crisis in the EU. It should be of great importance to Georgian residents as the adherence to visa rules will lead to the maximised benefits of visa-free movement.

It is noteworthy that the refusal rate for other Eastern Partnership countries, as well as for Russia and Turkey, was much lower: Belarus – 0.3%, Russia – 0.9%, Ukraine – 1.9%, Turkey – 3.9%, Azerbaijan – 4%, Armenia – 10.1%.

The 2015-2016 visa statistics of the EU/Schengen consulates in Georgia are given below. Other EU/Schengen countries are represented indirectly, namely by diplomatic missions of other countries (Diagram 6).

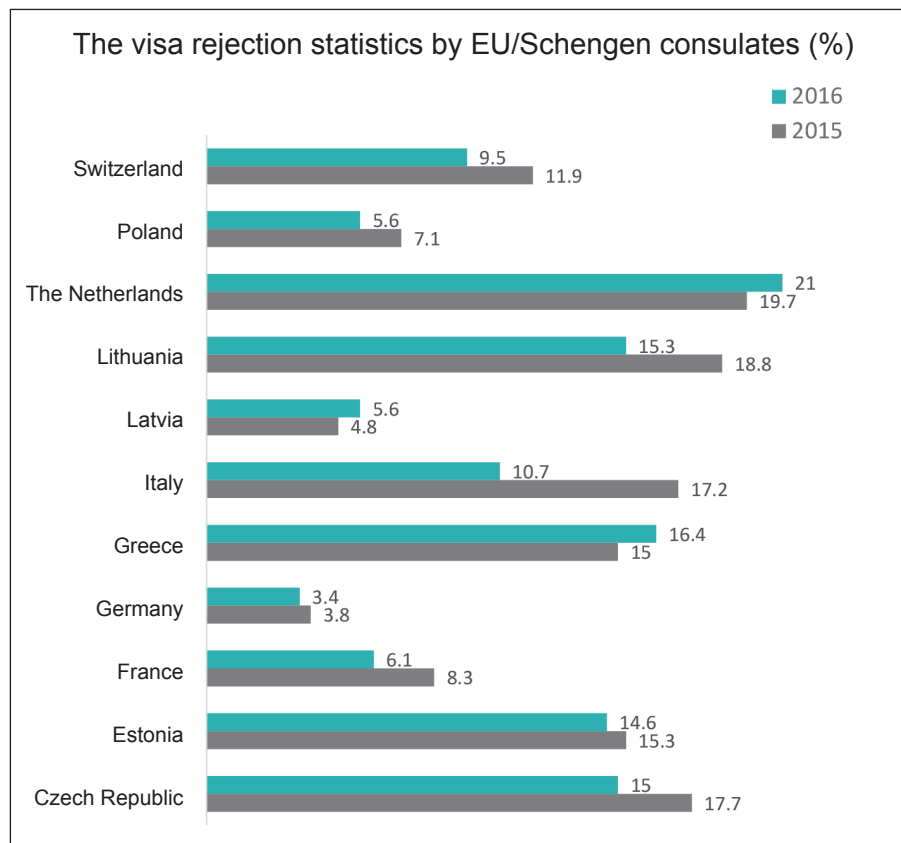
Figure 5.



Source: Visa statistics for consulates (European Commission)

¹⁷ Complete statistics on short stay visas issued by the Schengen States, 2016 (April 2017). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy_en Details can be found here

Figure 6.



Source: Visa statistics for consulates (European Commission)

Despite the rise in the number of visas issued, visa refusals for Georgian citizens remain consistently high. The average refusal rate for short-stay visa applications lodged by Georgian citizens was 12.2% in 2016, almost twice higher than the EU/Schengen average of 6.9% for that year.

The EU/Schengen visa denial rates vary significantly from year to year. The refusal rates between different issuing EU countries that have embassies in Georgia also vary, with three countries showing the highest rate: Netherlands (21%), Greece (16.4%) and Lithuania (15.3%).

According to the European Commission's staff working document,¹⁸ these high visa refusal rates can be explained by the fact that Georgian nationals frequently falsely

declare business, training events or visiting acquaintances as the purpose of their intended travel, as well as by the high number of falsified supporting documents, such as false bank statements or proof of employment that are often provided to the applicants by assisting agencies. The main concern of the EU countries is that these visas would be used for travelling to other member states and/or for reasons other than those stated in the application (e.g. unauthorized work).

It is expected that when visa requirements for Georgians are abolished, those who were denied EU visas before are likely to take advantage of the visa-free regime and move from Georgia to an EU country. According to available data, 25,046 Georgian citizens were denied entry to the EU/Schengen area in 2014-2016. These people

¹⁸ European Commission, Staff Working Document, accompanying the European Commission's "Fourth progress report on Georgia's implementation of the action plan on visa liberalization", December 2015, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015SC0299&from=EN>

represent a certain risk group who can be expected, with a high degree of probability, to violate the visa-free movement rules.

Despite the lifting of visa requirements, Georgian citizens can be asked at the EU/Schengen border to present, along with a valid biometric passport, a valid travel document or documents proving the purpose and conditions of stay (for example tickets for further journeys and return tickets; reservation of accommodation; invitation letter in case of visits, conferences or events;), as well as evidence of sufficient means of subsistence, both for the duration of the intended stay and for the return.¹⁹ If failed to do so, they can be denied entry to the EU.

According to the available statistical data (Table 2), Georgians are less and less likely to be refused entry to the EU/Schengen area.

According to the European Commission's staff working document, the high visa refusal rates can be explained by the fact that Georgian nationals frequently falsely declare business, training events or visiting acquaintances as the purpose of their intended travel, as well as by the high number of falsified supporting documents, such as false bank statements or proof of employment.

The drop in entry denials to Poland, one of the most desirable destinations for Georgians since 2009, is particularly noteworthy. Georgian travellers often use Belarus, a country that has a visa-free regime with Georgia, as a transit route to Poland and further on to the EU territory. This circum-

Table 2. Entry denial statistics for Georgian citizens at the EU/Schengen external borders, 2008-2015.

EU/Schengen member countries	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
28 members of the European Union	430	6 100	3 345	2 845	8 980	8 210	3 205	1 375
Poland	40	5 685	2 885	2 340	8 245	7 250	1 345	505
Romania	25	5	20	15	10	25	230	170
Latvia	5	10	20	80	215	320	960	145
Greece	50	125	75	75	95	160	210	135
Lithuania	15	75	145	115	115	110	145	65
Netherlands	10	20	35	50	60	60	45	50
Italy	30	10	15	20	35	60	70	30
France	30	25	15	30	20	30	5	25
Hungary	0	5	5	5	10	10	10	25
UK	30	35	25	20	20	25	20	25
Germany	50	20	25	20	20	20	25	25
Bulgaria	50	20	20	10	70	50	20	25
Czech Republic	0	5	10	10	10	10	5	25

Source: Eurostat, 25.02.2017.

¹⁹ The ministry of foreign affairs of Georgia, The guide to the EU visa-free movement, 2016, Available in Georgian at: <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/visa-free-guide.aspx>

Given the current hard social and economic situation in the country, it would be fair to assume that economic motivation plays the dominant role in migration flows from Georgia to the EU/Schengen area. Migrants tend to prioritize countries with better employment opportunities and social welfare programmes than in Georgia.

stance accounts for a the high entry denial rate at the Polish border.

Georgian citizens often choose to travel to the EU by land as they cannot board an air flight without a visa and use a land route as an alternative way to avoid the visa requirements.

George Jashi, the executive secretary of the governmental commission for migration,²⁰ attributed the reduction in the denial rate for Georgian citizens at the EU/Schengen borders to the government's VLAP-related reforms and information campaign, which are designed to emphasise positive aspects

of legal migration and negative consequences of irregular migration.

For an objective assessment of migration risks for Georgian citizens in the EU/Schengen area it is vital to determine how many Georgian migrants and asylum seekers are staying in EU countries illegally.

An analysis of the statistical data has revealed that some EU countries seem to be the most attractive for unauthorized Georgian immigrants (Table 3), with Germany, Greece and France being the top three. The number of illegal Georgian migrants is much higher in these countries than in other EU member states.

Polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) over the last five years²¹ showed that unemployment, inflation, and poverty are consistently ranked among the top five issues for Georgians. According to November NDI research in 2016, most of the respondents pointed out unemployment (58%), rising prices and inflation (38%), and poverty (30%) as their biggest concerns.

Table 3. Illegal migration statistics – the number of Georgian citizens found to be staying illegally in the EU countries, 2008-2015.

EU/Schengen member countries	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
28 members of the European Union	5 005	7 180	5 325	4 285	5 335	4 930	6 305	5 360
Germany	460	605	710	585	1 085	1 380	1 580	1 495
Greece	1 915	2 395	1 340	850	795	590	820	1 055
France	0	410	400	285	390	400	905	830
Spain	635	595	440	355	290	245	390	455
Italy	265	245	370	335	445	395	420	360
Austria	490	895	450	345	410	340	390	290
Switzerland	0	0	0	205	200	245	220	185
Belgium	140	110	125	90	125	115	180	160
Poland	20	255	75	95	210	215	210	135
UK	125	135	105	90	110	80	70	105

Source: Eurostat, 25.02.2017.

²⁰ Interview with George Jashi, the executive secretary of the governmental commission for migration, Tbilisi, 03.02.2017.

²¹ National Democratic Institute, public opinion research in Georgia, December 2016. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_November%202016%20poll_Issues_ENG_vf.pdf

Given the current hard social and economic situation in the country, it would be fair to assume that economic motivation plays the dominant role in migration flows from Georgia to the EU/Schengen area. Migrants tend to prioritize countries with better employment opportunities and social welfare programmes than in Georgia.

The fall of the national currency, Lari, and the decline in the consumer buying power put additional strains on Georgia's economic development and may further fuel outward migration to the EU.

Although the number of Georgians seeking asylum in the EU countries has been on a steady decline up to 2016 years, it still remains quite high (Table 4).

Germany and France have had the largest number of overstays and asylum applications by Georgian citizens.

The asylum statistics reflect the ongoing processes in the country. Asylum applications peaked in 2009 and 2012, the years

Unemployment, economic hardship and social insecurity are often cited as a reason for asylum claim, though under the current norms these reasons do not fit the asylum eligibility criteria. Only 6.6% of the asylum applications were accepted in 2016.

marked by significant troubles and tensions caused by the Russian-Georgian war in the first case and the change of government in the parliamentary elections in the second.

Until recently Georgians consistently were among the top 15 citizenships of asylum seekers in the EU/Schengen area. Since 2013, however, the number of asylum applications from Georgian citizens has decreased, not least because of the continuing political stability in the country. In 2016 Georgia has been ranked 24th in the EU asylum trends statistics.²²

According to the European Commission's staff working document accompanying the fourth progress report, the available data

Table 4. Georgian asylum seekers in the EU

EU/Schengen member countries	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
28 members of the European Union	5 520	11185	7 595	7 515	11 675	9 815	9 070	8 205	8830
Germany	285	640	750	525	1 430	2 485	3 180	3 195	3770
France	460	540	1 435	1 740	2 680	2 695	1 610	1 325	1165
Sweden	225	370	290	280	750	620	805	890	725
Austria	510	975	370	260	300	255	415	405	350
Switzerland	480	640	640	400	725	655	465	405	465
Poland	70	4 180	1 085	1 735	3 235	1 240	720	390	125
Greece	2 240	2 170	1 160	1 120	895	535	350	385	690
Belgium	275	385	365	400	505	370	430	300	240
Netherlands	75	425	610	235	250	215	335	265	595
Italy	65	85	80	30	65	105	90	135	195

Source: Eurostat, 12.03.2017.

²² EUROPEAN ASYLUM SUPPORT OFFICE – Latest asylum trends – 2016 overview. (2017) Available at: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Latest%20Asylum%20Trends%20Overview%202016%20final.pdf>

suggest that political factors and effects of internal displacement cannot be totally excluded from the migration risk assessment.

Despite the persistently high number of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU/Schengen area, the analysis shows that Georgians are not adequately informed about the EU asylum eligibility criteria, as most of the asylum applications do not meet the EU regulations and requirements. Applicants often cite unemployment, economic hardship and social insecurity as a reason for their asylum claim, though under the current norms such applications are considered unfounded. Only 6.6% of the Georgian asylum applications were accepted in 2016, most of them – almost half of the total – by France.

EU countries review asylum applications on the basis of a “safe countries of origin” list. A country is considered safe when there is a democratic system and generally and consistently no persecution, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment on the grounds of race, religion, political opinion, nationality, and membership in a social group, no threat of violence, and no armed conflict. It is worth noting that the EU does not have a common list of safe countries of origin – each EU member has its own one. France, Bulgaria, Austria, Belgium, and Netherlands have designated Georgia a safe country of origin. It means that Georgians have very little, if any, chance of being granted asylum in these countries, unless they provide convincing and solid justifications to back their claim.

On 30 June 2016 the US State Department released its annual **Trafficking in Persons Report**.²³ In previous years Georgia belonged to countries under “Tier-1” meaning

that the country had been both a transit as well as destination for trafficking.

As a result of complex anti-trafficking measures undertaken in 2015-2016, Georgia joined the ranks of countries with efficient and successful anti-trafficking policies. It is noteworthy that Georgia is the only “Tier-1” country in the Caucasus region. Therefore, it can be assumed that Georgia is a low-risk country for the EU from in this respect.

Activities of Georgian criminal groups on the EU territory are another important factor to consider. According to the “Transcrime” research report,²⁴ published by the directorate-general for the internal policies of the EU, Georgian organized crime groups are active in some European countries. Importantly, Georgia has significantly strengthened cooperation with the EU countries in the area of law-enforcement and security in the past few years. For instance, Georgian police attaché offices have been established in several countries, contributing to crime prevention and reduction efforts.²⁵

In another important development Georgia and Europol signed an agreement on operational and strategic cooperation to combat serious and organized cross-border criminal activities.²⁶

It should be noted that according to articles released by the German media (Bild, Die Welt) in the period preceding the visa liberalisation with Georgia Georgian organised criminal groups were responsible for most of burglary/robbery cases in residential areas. However, the 2015 crime statistics of the German federal criminal police office showed that these reports were incorrect, as Georgian suspects made up only 6.4% of the total suspected foreign criminals.²⁷

²³ Department of State of the United States of America, Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2016. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf>

²⁴ Joint research center of transnational crime, From Illegal Markets to Legitimate Businesses: The Portfolio of Organised Crime in Europe (2015). Available at: <http://www.transcrime.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ocp.pdf>

²⁵ The Ministry of Internal Affairs, 03.12.2017. Available in Georgian at: <http://police.ge/ge/giorgimghebrishvilishvedetissh-ministrsshekhvda/9670>

²⁶ Georgia-Europol operational and strategic cooperation agreement, 10.04.2017, Available in Georgian at: <http://police.ge/ge/saqartvelosa%C2%ADda%C2%ADevropols%C2%ADshoris%C2%ADoperatuli%C2%ADda%C2%ADstrategiuli%C2%ADtanamshromlobis%C2%ADshesakheb%C2%AD%20shetankhmeba%C2%ADgaformda/10530>

²⁷ Die Kriminalität in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Polizeilichen Kriminalstatistik 2015, (2016). Available in German at: <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Broschueren/2016/pks2015.pdf?blob=publicationFile>

There is a risk that the visa liberalization may result in an increase of activity by various criminal groups, which may try to use Georgian territory as a convenient alternative transit route to smuggle drugs and other illegal items to the EU. It is also likely that third country nationals may attempt to use forged Georgian biometric passports to enter the EU/Schengen area. To address these concerns, relevant governmental agencies need to intensify their efforts and respond to these challenges timely and with maximum efficiency.

In line with the VLAP requirements, inter-sectoral cooperation has considerably improved, and adequate human and financial resources have been assigned to relevant agencies. A series of national strategies has been updated and quality control and training departments were set up, paving the way for substantial improvement of the system. The commission staff working document underlines that the Georgian authorities are dealing with the risks posed by OCGs and “thieves-in-law” of Georgian origin by establishing the necessary legislative framework and institutional mechanisms, notably introduced under the VLAP.

Due to the pressure the EU members face from the refugee crisis, some EU countries have expressed scepticism about the visa-free regime with third countries. It is therefore important to make sure that all visa-free regulations are strictly adhered to in order not to give them additional arguments against visa liberalization and keep them from calling into question the visa-free movement for Georgian citizens.

International experience

It is vital that Georgia learn from the international experience of visa-free regimes,

There is a risk that the visa liberalization may result in an increase of activity by criminal groups who may try to use Georgian territory as a convenient alternative transit route to smuggle drugs and other illegal items to the EU.

notably by looking at the cases of Balkan countries and Moldova. The experience of these countries can help Georgia to analyse and properly assess the potential benefits and accompanying risks of the visa-free movement and ensure better policy planning and risk management.

Like Georgia, these countries also implemented far-reaching reforms as part of the visa liberalization process. It should be noted, at the same time, that Georgia’s VLAP was drawn on the basis of Balkan experience which had considerably shaped European Union’s requirements for Georgia.

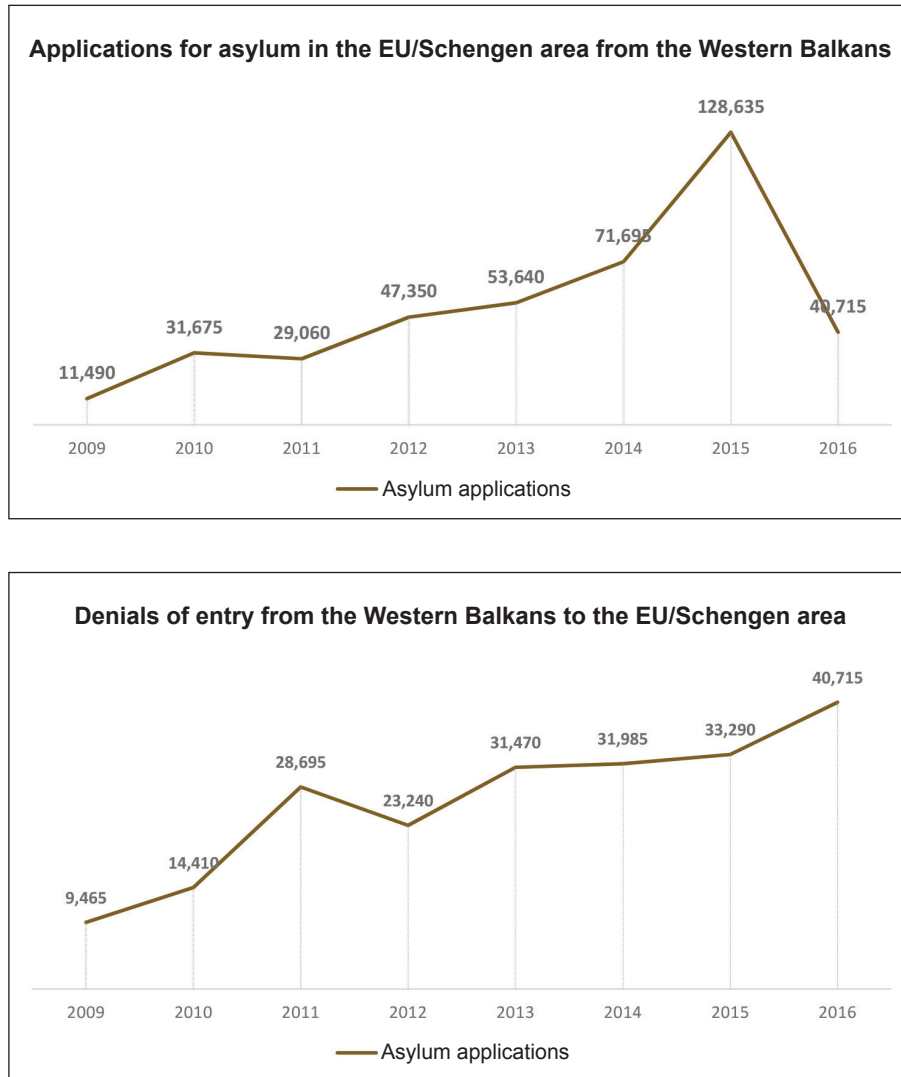
The Western Balkan countries were granted the visa-free access to the EU/Schengen area in 2009-2010: former Yugoslav republics of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in 2009, while Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina joined in 2010.

According to the FRONTEX risk analysis reports on Europe’s eastern borders,²⁸ after the European Union lifted visa requirements for the Balkan countries, many Balkan residents violated EU migration rules and abused the visa-free regime.

The FRONTEX statistical data and monitoring reports shed light on the serious challenges the Balkan countries faced after the visa liberalization, particularly a dramatic rise of asylum requests to the EU countries from the Western Balkans and increased entry denials at the Schengen borders (Diagram 7).

²⁸ European Border and Coast Guard Agency, 27.02.2017, <http://frontex.europa.eu/publications/>

Figure 7.



Source: FRONTEX, 2015.

All Western Balkan states experienced negative post-visa liberalization trends, notably the increase of asylum seekers and entry denials, with Albania and Serbia standing out as the biggest abusers of the visa-free system.

In the case of Albania, for instance, one year after the start of the visa-free regime, in 2011, the number of asylum applications increased by 40% and reached a total of 3,080. The trend continued in the following years and in 2016 the EU countries received 18,190 asylum applications from Albania. A total of 16,815 Albanians were refused entry to the EU/Schengen area in 2011 (60% of all

Balkan entry denials), eight times more than in previous year. Almost the same number, 16,910, were denied access in 2015.

Compared to Albania, the number of post-visa liberalization asylum applications from Serbia soared even more, by nearly 300%, and hit 18,855. In 2016 Serbians filed 10,510 asylum applications in the EU/Schengen countries, the lowest figure since 2010. After the visa-free regime came into force, 6,590 Serbian nationals were denied entry to the EU/Schengen area, almost 100% more than in the previous year. The latest entry denial figure for Serbia stands at 7,940.

Despite the increased number of asylum applications from the Western Balkans, only 2.6% of them were accepted in 2016, a clear indication that the overwhelming majority of these applications were unfounded.

Analysis of the entry denials from the Balkans to the EU/Schengen area has uncovered some complex problems and challenges stemming from different issues. According to FRONTEX reports,²⁹ Balkan

With the migration crisis high on the EU agenda, EU countries, facing serious challenges from growing migration flows, have increasingly focused their resources and attention on border and migration management.

residents have been refused entry to the EU/Schengen area for the following main reasons:



In light of these problems, discussions were held in the EU with a view to temporarily re-impose visa requirements for people coming from the Western Balkans. However, no decision was made in the end.

The above described cases are particularly relevant for Georgia, as the country is facing similar risks due to its current hard social and economic conditions. With the migration crisis high on the EU agenda, EU countries, facing serious challenges from growing migration flows, have increasingly focused their resources and attention on the border and migration management.

In the case of Moldova, unlike a majority of the Balkan states, the visa liberalization did not produce serious negative tendencies (Figure 8). When analysing Moldova's

successful example, it is important to bear in mind that more than 500 thousand Moldovan citizens had acquired Romanian citizenship, which had enabled them to travel and work in the EU/Schengen area without visas, before their country received visa-free status.

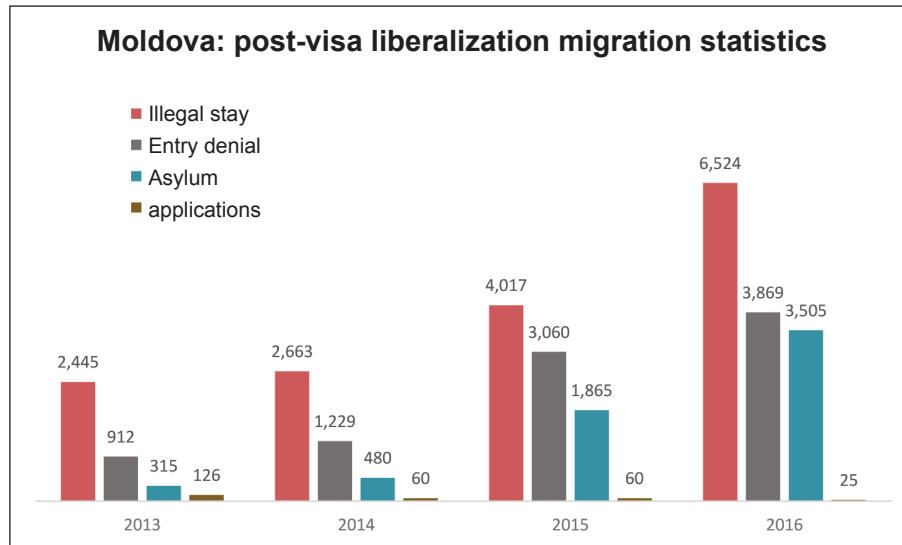
Moldova managed to create a more or less stable and sustainable migration management framework, though the persistent economic crisis (unemployment is the number-one problem for 34% of Moldovan residents, while 83% think that the country is going in the wrong direction³⁰) has increased violations and abuses of the visa-free regime.

According to Moldova's border police, more than 460,000 Moldovan citizens travelled to

²⁹ European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Western Balkans Annual Risk Analysis for 2012. Available at: http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/WB_ARA_2012.pdf

³⁰ Public Opinion Survey Residents of Moldova, March, 2016. Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_poll_presentation-moldova-march_2016.pdf

Figure 8.



the EU/Schengen area in the first year of the visa-free movement.³¹ Compared to this figure, the number of abuses and violations of the visa-free travel are relatively low. Some 200-300 thousand Moldovans reside currently in the EU/Schengen countries – and the overwhelming majority of them are legal immigrants. Violations of the visa-free travel rules by Moldovans are rare because most of them seek legal opportunities to work and stay in the EU.

The number of rejected visa applications is another important indicator to analyse. By the time , Moldova was granted the visa-free status in 2014, only 3.8% of the Schengen visa applications were rejected. In Georgia, in contrast, by 2016 12.2% of visa applications were rejected.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the high number of requests for the Moldovan biometric passports from residents of Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria. In the first visa-free year more than 27 thousand of the 200 thousand population

of Transnistria applied for the Moldovan biometric passport.³²

Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, the Georgian minister for reconciliation and civil equality, believes that visa liberalization can greatly facilitate the peace process. The Georgian government, she says, will work to ensure that residents of the occupied territories who have Georgian passports are able to benefit from the visa-free regime, while those local residents who do not have Georgian citizenship will be able to get Georgian passports, provided that they meet certain requirements.³³

Along with the above described international cases, Georgia has also some important lessons to learn from its visa-free experience with Israel. According to the Georgian foreign ministry, an increasing number of Georgians have applied for asylum in Israel since the two countries signed a visa-free movement agreement in 2014. Only one Georgian citizen applied for asylum in Israel in 2013 but three years later, in 2016, Israel received 3,740 asylum applications from Georgia.³⁴

³¹ One year of visa free regime for Moldova: Half a million citizens traveled to EUÁ. Available at: <http://www.moldova.org/en/one-moldovan-in-100-is-very-satisfied-with-way-of-life-160966-eng/>

³² One year of visa free regime for Moldova: Half a million citizens traveled to EUÁ. Available at: <http://www.moldova.org/en/one-moldovan-in-100-is-very-satisfied-with-way-of-life-160966-eng/>

³³ The Office of the Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality of Georgia, 29.09.2016. Available in Georgian at: <http://smr.gov.ge/NewsDetails.aspx?ID=823>

³⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10.03.2017

At the same time, the number of Georgians who were refused entry to Israel has also gone up, from 884 in 2015 to 3,974 in 2016. Despite Israel's tough immigration policy, it remains an attractive destination for Georgians due to significant "pull" factors – jobs and better social and economic conditions.

Despite the existing challenges, Georgia's successful implementation of the VLAP and the country's migration profile suggest that Georgia, without additional problems and in the presence of adequate political efforts, has sufficient capacity to effectively manage risks and issues related to the visa-free travel.

Unlike the Balkan states and Moldova, Georgia does not have a land border with the EU/Schengen area. Nevertheless, lessons learnt from the Balkans and Moldova provide wealth experience that Georgia should embrace in order to ensure smooth transition to the visa-free relations with the EU.

Anti-Western propaganda

The introduction of visa-free arrangement of movement is an important step forwards European integration that opens up diverse windows of opportunity to each of Georgian citizens.

But the process of the European integration is going forward under the shadow of growing Russian propaganda in Georgia.³⁵ Russia's weapon of choice to influence Georgia's foreign policy priorities and derail its pro-Western course, is rich and complex.

Today Russian "soft power" is a matter of concern, and a challenge, not only for Georgia and Soviet successor states, but

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for Europe and USA as well. Amid the continuing migration crisis and the rise of Euroscepticism across Europe, Russia is trying to assert its power and influence on the international arena.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on 17 December 2015, ahead of the European Commission's fourth progress report on Georgia, that Russia was ready to lift visa requirements for Georgian citizens and reiterated the pledge some time later. The words were soon followed by deeds – the Russian foreign ministry eased the visa regime for Georgia.³⁶ Russia's move has once again corroborated that Moscow is willing to challenge the West in the battle for hearts and minds of Georgians.

The EU visa liberalization for Georgia drew a very negative and aggressive reaction from openly pro-Russian online and print media in Georgia.

Against the backdrop of the steadily progressing visa liberalization dialogue between Georgia and the EU, Russian high-ranking officials have made repeated statements³⁷ about the possibility of visa-free entry to Russia for Georgian citizens. Unlike the West, however, Russia does not require systemic democratic reforms from Georgia in return for the

³⁵ Liberal academy, Tbilisi, Russia's soft and hard power in Georgia, 2016. Available in Georgian at: <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/politikis%20dokumenti.pdf>

³⁶ Radio Liberty – Russia Eases Visa Requirements for Georgia, Promises to Cancel Them At All, December 2015, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ruseti-sakartvelos-savizo-rejims-umartivebs/27442372.html>

³⁷ Radio Liberty – What Russia Wants from Georgia in Return for Visa Waiver, December 2013. Available in Georgian at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ruseti-sakartvelos-savizo-rejims-umartivebs/27442372.html>

visa waiver. Instead, it is seeking political dividends, mostly in the form of territorial concessions and/or compromises that can weaken Georgia's sovereignty.

The EU visa-liberalisation for Georgia has stirred fury and frenzy among those Georgian based print and online media outlets which have been particularly sympathising with Russia.³⁸

A myriad of articles have been published about “perils” and “pitfalls” of the visa-free travel, about “depopulation” and “poverty” that befell the Baltic states as a result of the visa liberalization, and about the “grave danger” to the Georgian nation’s genetic heritage and identity from the visa-free regime.³⁹ A heated debate is raging across the country with opponents promoting the view that the visa liberalization is not an act of support for Georgia but a tool intended to benefit only a small “privileged caste” of Georgians, not everyone, and turn the rest of the Georgians

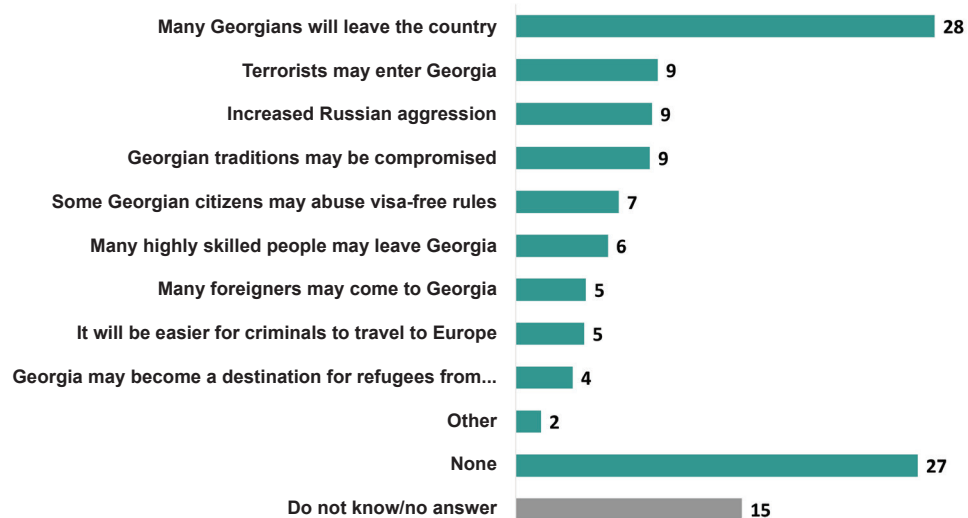
into “service personnel” on the one hand, and also to punish Russia on the other.⁴⁰

The research conducted by the CRRC-Georgia in January 2017 found that the wider public is saturated with such myths and stereotypes (Figure 9).

Apart from different social groups, several Georgian political parties, most notably Nino Burjanadze’s Democratic Movement and the Alliance of the Patriots of Georgia known – for their outspoken scepticism towards the visa liberalization – are also actively promoting the anti-Western narrative.⁴¹ A few months before Georgia was granted the visa-free status, Nino Burjanadze had claimed that Georgia would never become a NATO member and should not expect visa liberalization in the foreseeable future. It is noteworthy that in August 2016 Nino Burjanadze together with an initiative group proposed constitutional changes to make Georgia a non-aligned country.⁴²

Figure 9.

q7. What dangers and risks can Georgia face from the visa liberalization? (% , maximum two options)



³⁸ Media development foundation, Anti-Western propaganda – Media monitoring report 2014-2015, 2015. Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/15/file/eng/Antidasavluri-ENG-web.pdf>

³⁹ Sakartvelo da Msoplio, What Will Visa Liberalization Bring for Georgia? December 2015. Available in Georgian at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/7543/>

⁴⁰ Evrokomunikatori, Myth detector, August 2014. Available in Georgian at: http://eurocommunicator.ge/geo/view_myth/29

⁴¹ Evrokomunikatori, Myth detector, February 2017. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCgQC_U4RpY

⁴² At the voters' initiative, the proposal for constitutional changes in Georgia, August 2017. Available in Georgian at: <http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/49/49745.pdf>

Russia is working hard to nurture various myths and stereotypes to sway the Georgian public opinion and instil nihilism and disenchantment against Georgia's European future, in order to strengthen and expand its own influence in the country.

The ratio of Georgians supporting Georgia joining the EU has always been consistently high in the country and increased even more after the visa liberalization, having reached almost 90% of the population.⁴³ Under such circumstances, it is of strategic importance for the government to have the ability and capacity to plan and implement robust public relations and communication policy to efficiently manage public expectations and ensure citizens' informed and sustained support for the country's European choice.

At a time when a new Russian propaganda mouthpiece, Tbilisi-24 TV,⁴⁴ is about to go on the air in Georgia with a portfolio including televised talk-shows and debates over major political and social issues, it is vital for the government to respond with a coherent and coordinated approach, effective measures and efficient risk management policy.

Conclusions

The European Union's visa liberalization for Georgia is a powerful political message, which can significantly accelerate the European integration process and make a positive impact on the country's political, economic, social and cultural development. It offers every Georgian citizen a broad spectrum of opportunities and lays the groundwork for more active people-to-people contacts and deeper integration.

The visa-free movement has also the potential to become a useful instrument of the conflict resolution policy. It can encourage

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peace processes and make Georgia more attractive to the residents of the occupied territories. Amid the growing Russian propaganda targeting the West, the visa-free access to the EU/Schengen zone can serve as an efficient mechanism to counter myths and misinformation campaigns.

To meet the VLAP requirements, the Georgian government carried out a series of comprehensive, far-reaching reforms, which created favourable conditions for the Georgian citizens to take full advantage of the new opportunities offered by the visa-free regime with the European Union.

The European Union is one of the most desired destinations for Georgians. Analysis of the current situation showed, however, that a majority of the Georgian citizens are ill-informed about the visa-free rules and regulations. As recent public opinion polls attest, misperceptions and stereotypes about the visa liberalization are widespread in the country, raising concerns that the visa-free system may be abused and the rules may be violated.

Analysis of the statistical data and research reports suggests that the risk of Georgia posing a security threat to Europe is very low. From this viewpoint, the country has recently undertaken a series of important measures and adopted new normative acts that fully comply with international standards. It is noteworthy, however, that the visa liberalization has turned Georgia into a convenient transit option for organized criminal groups.

⁴³ IRI – Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia, 22 February –8 March 2017. Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf

⁴⁴ The Georgian national regulatory communication commission, Tbilisi-24 Ltd was granted the broadcasting license, December 2016). Available in Georgian at: <https://www.gncc.ge/ge/news/press-releases/shps-tbilisi-24-ma-mauwyeblobis-ufleba-miigo.page>

Despite significant improvement in migration management policy in recent times, some of Georgia's indicators continue to raise concerns. Among these indicators are, for instance, a high number of illegal stays, rejected visa applications, etc.

International experience shows that even with successful reforms, the EU/Schengen visa liberalization can lead to serious challenges that may endanger the country's visa-free status. It is, therefore, crucial for Georgia to pay close attention to potential challenges with respect to migration and security of its own citizens and take appropriate steps to address them in a timely manner and effectively prevent additional problems and challenges to the visa-free regime.

Given that Georgia is a small country and has no land border with the EU, it is unlikely to pose a serious security risk to European countries after the removal of the visa barriers. However, it is also important to factor the country's political and economic stability into the equation, as any instability can greatly increase migration flows.

The immediate strategic objective for Georgia now is to continue reforms and ensure the sustainability of the achieved results. Its successful implementation will largely determine the long-term prospects of the visa liberalization.

Recommendations

- Continue robust and comprehensive information campaign after the start of the visa-free regime to adequately inform the public of the benefits and requirements of visa-free movement.
- Provide detailed and up-to-date information about the visa liberalization for the strategic target groups (personnel of the border checkpoints, public servants and employees of the relevant governmental agencies, local self-governments, mass media, civil sector organizations, etc).
- Improve Georgia's migration profile and systematically gather, process and analyse relevant statistical data.
- Foster bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the EU countries in the area of law enforcement and security, including information exchange and planning/implementation of joint operations.
- Intensify efforts to support and facilitate legal migration to the EU/Schengen area, while simultaneously taking measures to tackle irregular migration.
- Improve coordination with the EU countries to set up and support circular migration schemes.
- Initiate talks with EU countries to find ways to legalize the status of the Georgian migrants who are currently residing in the EU illegally.
- Take more active steps to adequately inform the residents of the occupied territories about the benefits and requirements of the visa liberalization, and improve their access to Georgian passport services to help them obtain Georgian IDs and passports.
- Improve and expand the capacity of relevant agencies to better and timely respond to the migration-related issues both at home and abroad.
- Continue the efficient implementation of the readmission agreement with the EU.
- Continue and intensify the strategic communication policy related to the visa liberalization and European integration and ensure its consistency and efficiency.