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## DECLASSIFICATION

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Delegations will find attached the declassified version of the above document.

The text of this document is identical to the previous version.

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# RESTREINT UE



**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

**Brussels, 28 February 2002 (13.03)  
(OR. fr)**

**6722/02**

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**VISA 35  
COMIX 150**

## **NOTE**

from :	Belgian delegation
to:	Visa Working Party
Subject :	Report on the EU meeting on consular and Schengen affairs in Moscow on 4 December 2001

The Belgian delegation has the honour to transmit the report on the consular cooperation meetings in Moscow to the Visa Working Party for information.

Attached to this document is a report on the EU meeting on consular and Schengen affairs which took place in Moscow on 4 December 2001. General statistics (incomplete) on visas issued by all Schengen representations in Moscow during the first eleven months of 2001 are also attached.

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The Belgian delegation also notably wishes to draw attention to the following:

- On 29 November 2001 an informal meeting took place at the Italian Ambassador's residence between an inspector of diplomatic posts from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a number of consuls from Schengen countries, including the Belgian Presidency. The inspector mainly expressed concern at the large number of Russians obtaining visas for the Schengen area via travel agencies and the infiltration into European Union territory by various criminal networks whose members come in as "tourists" (he mentioned Russian gangs active mainly in the Rimini area on the Adriatic coast). This preoccupation had become even more acute after the events of 11 September 2001. The Italian Embassy in Moscow had in the meantime taken a number of steps to monitor travel agencies which apply for visas more closely. However, some colleagues were somewhat sceptical about this; they pointed out that in general diplomatic infrastructure and staff in general were inadequate to exercise real control over the large numbers of visa applications (more than a million applications for all Schengen countries combined were made in Moscow in 2000) – which might help to explain the very low refusal rate – and quoted the example of the United States Embassy in Moscow where every visa applicant was now interviewed personally by a US visa official.
- The conclusion of the discussions on a common visa policy (and a uniform approach to travel agencies) was that locating all visa departments in one large building would considerably help to improve local cooperation and efficiency.

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## REPORT ON THE EU MEETING ON CONSULAR AND SCHENGEN AFFAIRS IN MOSCOW ON 4 DECEMBER 2001

**Present:** Belgium (Chair)/Finland/Germany/Greece/Ireland/Italy/Luxembourg/Netherlands/  
Portugal/ Spain /Sweden/ United Kingdom

**Apologies from:** European Commission delegation/Austria/Denmark/France/Iceland/Norway

### **Agenda items**

#### **1. Trends in visa application numbers**

After the customary exchange of statistics, the Belgian Presidency pointed out that the steady increase in the number of visa applications in Moscow could lead to processing problems and asked other countries for their opinion. The United Kingdom did not see this as a problem since it could always obtain more staff from London. Italy had a staff problem and was trying (after a recent post inspection) to keep the number of applications low by means of new rules and quotas: only travel agencies registered with IATA, MATA or RATA (travel agencies' representative organisations) which had an Italian partner were allowed to submit visa applications, and this had led to a 50% decrease in recent weeks. In addition, a travel agency could lodge no more than 100 applications per day. Greece had already tried to introduce similar measures, but had withdrawn them again after "threats and attacks". Belgium said that it did not completely exclude travel agencies, but since April 2001 had been sending all visa applications submitted via travel agencies to Brussels for approval, which was having a dissuasive effect and had automatically led to a "drying up" of such applications. The Belgian Presidency pointed out that individual measures by embassies would not work as long as there was no common visa policy (see point 2). Since 1 October 2001 the Netherlands no longer allowed travel agencies to submit applications; they could only collect them. Germany accepted only "trustworthy" (= officially registered) travel agents, but when the other agencies had threatened to bring a legal action which the German State would very probably lose, the measure was withdrawn. Lobbies in Berlin had also exerted strong pressure. Travel agencies now had to make an appointment. Germany was very dissatisfied with travel agencies because fraud was happening frequently but, because of its limited staff and infrastructure resources, was virtually powerless to do anything about it.

## 2. Common policy on travel agencies

In Spain's opinion, there was no point in working exclusively with registered agencies because non-registered agencies would then cooperate with those which were registered and submit visa applications via them. Italy agreed with that view. The ideal method would be a personal interview (as conducted by the US Embassy), but that was ruled out for most EU embassies in Moscow in view of the enormous numbers of visa applicants and their limited infrastructure. The Belgian Presidency pointed out that the authorities in the capitals were clearly worried about the fact that applications for visas were being made via travel agencies. Greece said it had no problems with Russian tourists, most of whom returned home, in contrast to Belgium, which had an enormous problem with Russian asylum seekers, who mainly entered the country using travel agencies and were in possession of valid visas from other Schengen countries. Sweden too was having a growing problem with Russian asylum seekers lately and asked the Schengen partners to cooperate on requests for information about asylum seekers found to have valid visas issued by other Schengen Embassies.

Conclusion of the discussion: **the setting up of common Schengen visa offices might help to resolve many problems and promote better local cooperation.**

## 3. Joint Working Party of Visa Consuls/Press Attachés

The Belgian Presidency said that this Working Party had been set up to improve the EU's image by publishing information and statistics on visas or organising press conferences. The perception of the public and media in Russia was that it was very difficult to obtain a Schengen visa, but all EU countries knew that this was not so, with the refusal rate being very low (3 to 5%). This was in stark contrast to the difficulties which EU nationals often experienced with Russian consulates and Russian border control authorities (exit visas). Germany had drawn up a common questionnaire (to be completed by all EU visa departments) with a view to an article on visas.

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A further plan was to send a discussion paper around the beginning of 2002 to EU Heads of Mission which would also deal with the visa regime for Russia and even with the possibility of doing away with it (the number of applications was growing steadily and the percentage of refusals was very low, but that might also be due precisely to the large numbers and very limited possibilities for checking). Spain doubted whether a working party of consuls and press attachés was a good idea. Ireland, on the other hand, believed it was a good idea to enable press attachés to exchange ideas with visa departments in order to improve our common European image. However, it was deemed preferable not to discuss the actual visa regime in such a working party, but rather among the chiefs of the various consular departments.

## **4. Cooperation on protecting EU nationals in Russia**

The Belgian Presidency asked whether the other participants were also aware of the recommendations of the Council of the European Union ("Guidelines on consular protection of EU citizens in the event of a crisis in third countries"); most of them replied in the negative. Most embassies had not taken any special measures since 11 September 2001, other than protecting the embassy buildings themselves [this subject had already been discussed at the meeting on "administrative matters"]. Germany was contacting with all known German nationals, asking them to register voluntarily. Some embassies in Moscow also covered Central Asia; in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan measures had already been taken by the EU Member States that were represented on the spot; nothing was known about Turkmenistan. None of those present had laid in food or emergency supplies. The German Embassy in Moscow had its own doctor.

## 5. Other business

Greece asked if the other members knew anything about the suspension of the issue of international passports in Chechnya. It appeared that persons registered in Chechnya could obtain an international passport in the neighbouring republics or at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. The Netherlands commented that in practice it was almost impossible for Chechens to obtain a passport at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Belgium was in any case cautious with visa applications from persons originating in the North Caucasus.

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total	% issued
Austria	issued	4696	4148	4654	5085	2756	3656	4065	3343	2830			35233	4,768065
Belgium	issued	564	825	1040	1103	977	1203	969	976	929	1348		9934	1,344364
Denmark	issued												0	0
Finland	issued	6430	4500	5124	5400	5363	6244	9264	6840				49165	6,653477
France	issued	8375	7311	14219	15829	11067	15062	17317	16669				105849	14,3245
Germany	issued	14655	14655	18351	18070	16154	18846	23976	21070	19545	20974	20223	206519	27,94812
Greece	issued	3633	3370	4269	7812	8772	12275	17790	13375				71296	9,648454
Iceland	issued												0	0
Italy	issued												0	0
Luxembourg	issued												0	0
Norway	issued												0	0
Portugal	issued	286	252	452	1360	942	1448	2340	2077	948			10105	1,367505
Spain	issued	8341	8404	10120	17058	25068	37089	44477	41176	28937	12062		232732	31,49551
Sweden	applic.	2230	2236	2985	2830	2670	3640	3764	3221	1931	2702		28209	3,817511
The Netherlands	applic.												0	0

Total issued 48924 45449 60762 73187 72827 98015 121622 106670 54172 37086 20223 0 738937

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