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Delegations will find attached the annual reports drawn up in the local Schengen cooperation, as transmitted by the services of the Commission.

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ANNEX

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC)

ANNUAL REPORTS – 2023

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* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO ALBANIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ALBANIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Sixteen Member States have diplomatic representations in Albania and six (Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, and Slovakia) are represented by other Member States for Schengen visas.

Some of the Member States represented in Albania do not issue Schengen visas in Albania but in neighbouring countries.

Among non-EU Schengen countries, only Switzerland has a diplomatic representation in Tirana but does not issue visas there.

Outside Tirana, Greece has two General Consulates (Gjirokastra and Korca). Italy has a General Consulate in Vlora.

Several EU Member States represented in Tirana also have Honorary Consuls outside the capital: Austria (Shkodra, Vlora), Bulgaria (Vlora), Czech Republic (Saranda), Hungary (Shkodra and Durres), Italy (Gjirokastra, Shkodra) Romania (Korca) and Slovenia (Durres). Italy also has one Consular Correspondent in Berat.

Some Member States without an Embassy in Albania have Honorary Consulates: Belgium (Lushnja), Denmark (Tirana), Finland (Tirana), Lithuania (Tirana), Malta (Tirana) and Portugal (Tirana).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In the absence of significant developments or concerns in terms of issuing Schengen visas in Albania, the EU Delegation organised and chaired only one hybrid meeting of the Local Schengen Cooperation on 25 September 2023, which was very well attended, with 17 Member States participating. The LSC meeting was organised back-to-back with the Local Consular Cooperation meeting.

The agenda and report was prepared by the EU Delegation with input from Member States.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

On 3 December 2021 COM Implementing Decision *C(2021) 8657 Establishing the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants for short stay visas in Albania and in Nepal* was adopted. This marked a significant deliverable for the LSC group in Albania in implementing the revised Visa code and concluded a period of intense exchanges among LSC members to draw-up the draft list. All Member States have started to apply the list since December 2021.

3.2 Exchange of information

LSC continues to provide a useful platform for Member States to exchange experience on their consular functions in Albania on statistics, trends, and cases of frauds, and exchange information on the functioning of the Schengen system.

Based on the information received, out of around 790 uniform visa applications lodged, around 700 have been issued (including MEV). Approval rate stood at 88%, similar to the previous year.

3.3 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The task of drawing up a harmonised list of supporting documents for Schengen visa applicants was finalised by the LSC in 2021. Since no major changes of trends or other particular issues were signalled in 2023, the exchanges largely focused on less LSC specific, but still related topics of migration flows, asylum applications by the Albanian citizens, perceived abuses by the Albanian nationals of the Schengen Information System (SIS) rules, the future entry into force of the Entry-Exit System (EES) and European Travel Information and Authorisation system (ETIAS), developments in the area of EU visa policy, and the lack of Albania's alignment with the EU's list of visa-free and visa exempt countries, which remains a matter of concern.

4. Challenges

Challenges set out in the European Commission's annual visa suspension mechanism report will continue to be addressed by the LSC, in particular the lack of visa policy alignment which raises potential risks in terms of irregular migration and security.

Detailed sharing of information and awareness raising will need to accompany the expected entry into force of EES and ETIAS in 2024.

The issue of the seemingly abusive requests by the Albanian nationals to access their personal data stored in the Schengen Information System (SIS), which was raised the previous year, was not brought to the attention of the LSC in 2023, even though the practice continues in some Member States.

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION EN ALGERIE

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) en ALGERIE
RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

Dix-neuf (19) Etats Membres[1] sont présents en Algérie (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IT, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SE) ; SI est en train d'établir une ambassade. En dehors de la capitale Alger, FR et ES disposent de consulats à Oran, et FR à Annaba. Pour la délivrance des visas, AT, BE, CZ, DE, ES, HU, NO et PL représentent, respectivement SI, LU, SK, LT, EE, LV, IS et SE. Parmi les Etats Membres de l'UE qui ne faisaient pas encore partie de l'espace Schengen en 2023, BG et RO sont présents en Algérie.

Le présent rapport a été approuvé par tous les Etats Membres présents en Algérie.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

La reprise des opérations de visa, commencée en 2022, se poursuit : en 2023, ca. 475 000 demandes de visa Schengen ont été introduites ; cela représente un croissance de 21% par rapport à 2022 (392 053) et de 239% par rapport à 2021 (140 212). Pour l'ensemble des Etats membres, les demandes introduites n'atteignent pas encore le volume d'avant la pandémie ; pour certains, par contre, le niveau de 2019 est atteint ou dépassé.

En 2023, neuf (9) réunions LSC ont eu lieu. La participation des Etats Membres est généralement élevée : la majorité des Etats Membres prennent part aux réunions de façon régulière. Les Etats Membres de l'UE qui ne font pas encore partie de l'espace Schengen sont invités et participent en tant qu'observateurs. La Délégation de l'UE préside les réunions et rédige les rapports, qui sont ensuite partagés avec les Etats Membres. Les équipes des consulats en dehors d'Alger reçoivent par courriel toutes les informations relatives aux activités du groupe LSC, y compris les rapports des réunions.

Lors des réunions, les principaux sujets abordés incluent : les échanges sur les statistiques, le phénomène du « visa shopping », les taux de refus, les modalités de prise de rendez-vous, et la lutte contre la fraude documentaire. Ce dernier sujet fait l'objet d'un effort particulier en 2023, avec l'organisation d'une campagne de communication sur la fraude documentaire et le démarrage d'une série de séances de formation et information pour le personnel consulaire.

[1] Etats Membres = pays Schengen

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3. État des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

En 2023, les Etats Membres et la Délégation de l'UE ont continué leur coopération, qu'on peut qualifier d'étroite, régulière et efficace, en conformité avec les dispositions du Code des Visas et les recommandations des manuels des visas I et II. En plus des réunions LSC, qui ont lieu avec cadence mensuelle, la coopération se fait par échanges d'emails et à travers une application de messagerie instantanée.

Les problèmes spécifiques liés aux opérations de visas en application du Code de Visas tels qu'ils ont été discutés lors des réunions LSC concernent notamment : le phénomène du « visa shopping », l'impact négatif du rôle des intermédiaires sur le système de prise de rendez-vous, et la fraude documentaire.

Les consulats des Etats Membres sont très souvent confrontés à des demandeurs qui soumettent leur dossier auprès de services consulaires d'un Etat Membre alors qu'il ressort du dossier ou bien de leurs demandes de visa précédentes que la destination principale de leur voyage serait, en réalité, un autre Etat Membre.

Des intermédiaires (agences, officines, etc.) réservent les rendez-vous en ligne dès qu'ils sont rendus disponibles sur les sites des consulats ou de leurs prestataires. Ces intermédiaires vendent en suite aux demandeurs les rendez-vous avec d'autres « services » qui souvent incluent la constitution de dossiers de visa et parfois la fabrication de documents falsifiés. Tout cela impacte négativement les opérations de visa, en rendant indisponibles les rendez-vous en ligne et contribuant à la mauvaise qualité des dossiers. Les Etats membres et leurs prestataires travailler pour s'attaquer à ce phénomène ; certains d'entre eux ont par exemple introduit cette année en phase expérimentale des outils de reconnaissance faciale qui permettent de vérifier l'identité du demandeur au moment de l'enregistrement en ligne et du rendez-vous même.

Les Etats Membres sont confrontés à des niveaux importants de fraude documentaire, avec des graves conséquences sur l'efficacité du travail des services consulaires qui doivent déployer des efforts et des ressources considérables dans la détection des faux documents. Ce phénomène contribue également au niveau élevé du taux de refus.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

En 2023, les Etats Membres ont continué à assurer l'application de la liste des documents justificatifs devant être présentés par les demandeurs de visa de court séjour en Algérie, adoptée le 26 aout 2021 par une décision d'exécution de la Commission européenne, suite aux discussions au sein du groupe LSC en 2019 et 2020. La liste est disponible sur les sites des consulats ou de leurs prestataires.

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3.3 Estimation du besoin d'adapter les règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

La décision d'exécution de la Commission européenne portant sur l'adaptation locale en Algérie de la cascade pour les visas à entrées multiples a été adoptée le 5 janvier 2022, suite aux discussions au sein du groupe LSC en 2020.

Les Etats Membres présents en Algérie sont informés du contenu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas et de l'adaptation locale de la cascade.

Alors que l'automatisme de la cascade a été limité à la délivrance des visas de deux ans, certains Etats Membres délivrent, en vertu de l'article 24 (2 quater) du Code des Visas, des visas à entrées multiples d'une durée de validité allant jusqu'à cinq ans à des demandeurs faisant preuve de leur intégrité et de leur fiabilité.

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

Pas d'autres initiatives réalisées relevant de l'harmonisation des procédures.

3.5 Echange d'informations

En ce qui concerne les statistiques trimestrielles, à la fin de chaque trimestre, la DUE demande aux Etats Membres de fournir leurs statistiques. La DUE consolide les statistiques sur la base du format partagé par le siège. Les statistiques consolidées du trimestre précédent sont discutées lors de la réunion LSC au début de chaque trimestre.

En 2023, les services consulaires des Etats Membres ont traité ca. 475 000 demandes et délivré près de 300 000 visas Schengen. Ces chiffres montrent que le volume des demandes traitées et des visas délivrés a augmenté de manière considérable par rapport à 2022 (+21% de demandes traitées et +57 % de visas délivrés) et 2021 (+239% de demandes traitées et +258% de visas délivrés). Le niveau d'avant la pandémie n'a pas encore été atteint pour l'ensemble des États membres (en 2019, 668 386 demandes avaient été introduites et 374 286 visas octroyés) ; toutefois, pour certains États membres les volumes de 2019 ont été atteints et dépassés.

Les principaux sujets abordés lors des réunions LSC de l'année 2023 incluent : le phénomène du visa shopping, les modalités de prise de rendez-vous, et la lutte contre la fraude documentaire. L'échange d'informations sur ces sujets permet aux Etats Membres de répondre de façon plus efficace aux problèmes récurrents et communs. Par exemple, ils apprennent, grâce aux échanges au sein de réunions LSC, les mesures prises par d'autres Etats Membres pour essayer de contrer le rôle des intermédiaires dans la prise de rendez-vous et peuvent s'en inspirer pour étudier des mesures similaires. En matière de lutte contre la fraude documentaire, l'échange d'informations et d'expériences permet d'identifier certaines fraudes répétitives et d'apprendre qu'il est possible de

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coopérer avec des entités locales qui sont susceptibles d'aider à détecter les faux documents (banques, sécurité sociale, etc.).

3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Comme proposé par certains États membres, la Délégation de l'UE a coordonné une action conjointe de communication entre les ambassades des pays Schengen représentés en Algérie. Celle-ci a eu lieu en juin 2023. L'objectif était de sensibiliser le public algérien aux risques constitués par l'inclusion de faux documents dans les demandes de visa, ce qui est souvent proposé par des intermédiaires. La campagne a obtenu une très bonne visibilité sur la presse algérienne et les médias sociaux. Elle a également attiré des critiques sur les médias sociaux, les internautes se plaignant de la difficulté d'obtenir un rendez-vous de visa.

Dans le quatrième trimestre, le groupe, coordonné par la Délégation, a également lancé une série de séances de formation et information sur la fraude aux différents documents de support utilisés dans les procédures de visa. Cette série s'est ouverte en décembre 2023 avec l'intervention des représentants des assurances médicales de voyage, et se poursuit en 2024.

4. Défis

Plusieurs Etats Membres ont continué, en 2023, à exprimer leurs préoccupations relatives à l'étendue et à l'impact des phénomènes du « visa shopping » et de la fraude documentaire en Algérie. Ceux-ci continueront à représenter des défis tout au long de l'année 2024.

La coopération et l'échange d'information, au sein du groupe LSC et de façon bilatérale entre les Etats Membres concernés, restera un outil essentiel pour faire face à ces défis et pour mitiger, dans le mesure du possible, leurs conséquences.

Parmi les initiatives en cours d'organisation, il y a plusieurs séances de formation et information sur la fraude documentaire : une rencontre avec Campus France et son expert en matière de fraude dans le domaine académique s'est tenue en janvier 2024 ; une rencontre avec la caisse nationale des assurances sociales est en préparation ; d'autres domaines d'intérêt sont les assurances sociales pour les travailleurs indépendants et les banques. Une formation avec des experts en fraude documentaire de l'agence Frontex est également prévue pour le mois d'avril.

Une nouvelle action conjointe de communication pourrait être envisagée avant le pic estival de demandes de visa.

5. Divers

Rien à signaler.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO ARMENIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ARMENIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

14 MS have resident embassies/ official (non-honorary) representations in Armenia; 8 out of them - France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic and Poland - issue Schengen visas on lspot.

Belgium is the 14th EU country that has opened an embassy in Yerevan in September, though the visas are still issued by the Embassy of Germany. Spain was 13th but is represented on the level of chargé d'affaires only.

For visa purposes, apart from their own countries, they generally represent:

- **France** represents Iceland, Norway, and Portugal;
- **Germany** represents Belgium, Luxembourg, and Sweden;
- **Italy** represents Finland and Malta;
- **Lithuania** represents Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Spain, and Denmark;
- **Poland** represents Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland;
- **Czech Republic** and **Greece** issue Schengen visa only to their respective countries;
- **Lithuania, Greece, Austria and Italy** co-operate with external service providers: VFS Global (LT, GR, AT) and TLS Contact (IT).

In the reporting period, the EU Delegation coordinated LSC meetings.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Two LSC meetings took place in the reporting period, i.e. on April 26 and October 12. Both meetings were organized by the EU Delegation and chaired by the Head of the PPI Section. The attendance rate was high. For both meetings, reports were written and shared with all participants.

Currently COVID-related situation is stable, most of the travel restrictions have been lifted, and the number of visa applicants has increased accordingly.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The MS managed to ensure tasks under the Visa Code.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The MS did not mention any particular need to further harmonise the existing list of supporting documents.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code (‘MEV cascades’)

The Commission defines a MEV cascade as the 'agreed approach of how many previous visas/trips the applicant has to prove to qualify for a long-validity MEV and how the length of validity for each subsequent visa would increase'.

Member States have developed diverging, mostly restrictive practices when issuing MEVs in Armenia.

The MS generally applied the cascade system; however, due to travel restrictions the system may not be fully implemented. Also, in view of the fact that issuance of MEVs for Armenian citizens is also regulated by the visa facilitation agreement between the EU and Armenia, adaptation of general rules to practically accommodate both regulations - the Visa Code and the Agreement - would be useful. The MS indicated further harmonization need on the ground with this respect.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Some need of the further harmonization of visa processes is still in place, particularly, a better coordination within the LSC was observed in 2023.
Unstable situation on the borders made us coordinate with Security managers’ meetings too. Contingency planning is needed and evacuation plans for EU MS and its citizens were discussed.

3.5 Exchange of information

The MS regularly exchanged information on visa statistics. However, there was a desire to make it more comprehensive so that it reflects i.a. various tendencies, cases of fraud, occurring challenges, i.e. a dramatic increase of the number of Russian nationals applied for Schengen visa. The email remained the main means of communication, which some MS described as “challenging.”

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

Considering the increased number of visa applicants and limited capacities of visa sections at the respective embassies, a long waiting time for visa appointments remains the most challenging and discussed topic. Issue concerning citizens of the Russian Federation, arrived to Armenia after the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, is still actual. For Russian nationals procedures are very strict, while when it concerns Armenian nationals with a dual citizenship, i.e. Armenian and Russian, embassies apply different procedures, there is no single approach. Visa shopping and re-sale of slots, which had been observed previously, are also mentioned as the most challenging issues.

One more issue to be taken into consideration relates to possible increase of migration risks after the exodus of over 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh after September 2023 Azerbaijani military attack.

5. Other issues

N/A

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO AUSTRALIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in AUSTRALIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 24 Schengen countries represented in Australia (AT, BE, CZ, HR, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, LI, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SK, SI, ES, SE, NO and CH) who regularly participate in the meetings of the LSC Group. These have embassies in Canberra and consular networks of varying extent across the country; some Embassies are not empowered to issue Schengen visas. Observer Countries represented in Australia attended on a semi-regular basis (BG, CY and RO). LSC group meetings are run back-to-back with the Consular Group, a formula that has been working well since its inception in 2013 (since 2014 non EU-Schengen Members can also attend the Consular Group meeting as observers, following local agreement in this sense).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

The LSC Group met twice during 2023, once during each Presidency. The attendance of the LSC meetings for the period under consideration was high. The Head of the Political, Press and Information Section of EUDEL chaired the meetings. Draft minutes were prepared by EUDEL, shared for approval with the Group under silent procedure and then submitted to HQ. We confirm that the Schengen countries normally share these minutes with their HQ.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EUDEL shared with MS the information pertaining to the revised Visa Code and the Visa Code Handbook, No apparent problem has arisen. This item is included as standard on all LSC Group meeting agendas.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

All Schengen countries represented in Australia have included on their websites the correct information regarding the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants of short stay visas in Australia (as per Commission Decision C (2017) 5853). During the last LSC meeting, a discussion took place regarding the documents required MS agreed that a marriage certificate will no longer be required as a supporting document for Schengen Visa application as a general requirement irrespective of the purpose of travel.

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A marriage certificate in original version remains mandatory only for family members of citizens of the EU. This will require an amendment to the existing list. All the necessary documents were sent to DG Home in the beginning of December 2023. Formal decision to be issued.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The issuing of MEVs was not discussed in any detail during LSC Group meetings (only some countries issue MEVs with a validity of 1 to 2 years). There is a de facto agreement in place among Schengen countries to share information if they feel a candidate may be "shopping" around, but no suggestion to harmonise visa-issuing practices: at this stage this is not considered necessary (small number of visa applications for most Schengen countries, hence low security risk).

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

EUDEL and the LSC Group drafted a document titled "Where to apply for a Schengen Visa in Australia" which is kept up to date and is available on the EUDEL's website, together with the FAQ. We have encouraged all Schengen countries to include both these documents on their websites to accompany the "Established list of common documents for Australia".

EUDEL advised the LSC Group that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) had linked their Smart Traveller Website to the EUDEL's website –
https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/before-you-go/the-basics/schengen?

3.5 Exchange of information

Since 2018, the rotating Consular Presidency has been collecting the visa statistics using the updated template provided by HQ. SE collected the statistics during the first six months of 2023 and ES during the last six months.

Most MS provide the data in a timely fashion; however, there are a few who still need to be reminded.

There have been no reported cases of fraud during 2023 and TMI has not been an item up for discussion. As advised previously, there were issues with insurance companies not offering adequate insurance. Since the EUDEL with the assistance of the LSC group drew up a list of insurance companies who offer adequate TMI and shared it with the group (including both onshore and offshore companies), this issue seems to have been resolved.

EUDEL shares information with Schengen countries on a regular basis.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Non-issuance of death certificates by Victoria State. Some MS raised this as an issue (contrary to NSW) and the DEL contacted the Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage Office and managed to ensure a solution (MS were offered to sign an MoU in this regard).

4. Challenges

No particular challenges presented themselves during 2022.

5. Other issues

No other issues at present.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO AZERBAIJAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in AZERBAIJAN
2023 REPORT[2]

1. Introduction

There are **20 EU Member States' diplomatic mission**s, accredited to Azerbaijan[3]. Among non-EU Schengen countries, **Switzerland** has a diplomatic mission in Baku.

13 Schengen countries issue visas in Azerbaijan: **Austria, Croatia, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, Slovakia** as well as **Switzerland**.

13 Schengen countries are represented in visa matters by other Schengen countries: **Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Sweden** are represented by **France**; **Estonia and Slovenia** are represented by **Latvia**; **Finland** is represented by **Lithuania** (as of 1 October 2023); **Malta** is represented by **Italy**. The Norvegian Embassy in Ankara represents **Denmark** and **Iceland** in visa matters.

The majority of LSC members use **external service providers**.

The reporting period covers the ninth year of the implementation of the **EU-Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation Agreement** (further referred as "the Agreement") (signed on 29 November 2013 and entered into force on September 1, 2014). Azerbaijan is **one of the thirteen** countries worldwide which has an effective Visa Facilitation Agreement with the EU (out of which two were subject of suspension in 2023). Statistical data shows that **Azerbaijani citizens** have largely benefitted from the provisions of the Agreement. Cross-border mobility of EU citizens across Azerbaijan's land borders continued to be limited in 2023 due to their continued closure since March 2020.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC meetings were held **four times** at **EU Delegation's premises** (January, July, September, November). The meetings were well attended. Non LSC EU Member States participated as **observers** at those meetings upon common agreement of the LSC members. EU Delegation's representatives chaired local LSC meetings. Local LSC group regularly exchanged non-sensitive information via a dedicated **Whatsapp group**. Compiling of **visa-related statistics** locally has been carried out by the French embassy.

[2] January - December 2023.
[3] Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Slovenia have their diplomatic representations accredited outside of Azerbaijan.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The Visa Code has been applied by the relevant embassies in Azerbaijan. No apparent problems have arisen.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

All Schengen countries represented in Azerbaijan have included on their websites information regarding the list of supporting documents to be submitted by prospective visa applicants.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The topic was regularly discussed at the LSC meetings and all relevant embassies reported they implement the „MEV cascade rule" in accordance with Article 24(2) of the Visa Code.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

LSC discussed harmonized practice regarding the requirement of a new passport after name change.

3.5 Exchange of information

LSC countries exchanged information on visa statistics, visa trends and visa processing at all meetings. During the whole year of 2023, in particular during the summer, a significantly increased trend of visa applications by Azerbaijani citizens to the Schengen area was reported, at levels higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the side of LSC countries, visa handling capacity has increased (e.g. Italy opened a new visa centre in autumn 2023 expanding its visa handling capacity).

LSC countries regularly exchanged information regarding cases of fraud in Schengen visa applications.

LSC countries reported that VISMail and Visa Information System was not user friendly.
As regards cooperation with external service providers, LSC countries regularly exchanged relevant information on experience with various service providers.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Following a Note verbal from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 2 August 2023 on visa-related issues, EU Delegation discussed elements of a reply to the Note at the LSC meeting of 27 September, as part of preparations for the EU-Azerbaijan Joint Visa Facilitation Committee in Baku. EU Delegation replied to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 November 2023.

4. Challenges

LSC member states will continue to exchange information and adjust their respective visa handling capacities, in line with their commitments under the EU-Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation Agreement. LSC members will continue to exchange information regarding any issues with visa appointments, in particular "no-shows", parallel/multiple visa applications, and high visa refusal rates. External service providers should provide comprehensive information on the relevant websites dedicated to the collection of visa applications.
In the run up to the UEFA EURO 2024 European Football Championship in Germany in June/July 2024 and the Olympic Games in France in July/August 2024 as well as in the run up to COP-29 climate conference in Baku in November 2024, an increased demand for Schengen visas among Azerbaijani citizens as well as for Azerbaijani visas among EU citizens is expected.

5. Other issues

The 7th joint EU-Azerbaijan Joint Visa Facilitation Committee was successfully held on 23 November 2023 in Baku.
The scheduled meeting of the joint EU-Azerbaijan Joint Readmission Committee in November 2023 in Baku was postponed (by the EU side). The next meeting is scheduled to take place in the first half of 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO BANGLADESH

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in BANGLADESH
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

10 Member States (CH, DE, DK, FR, ES, HU, IT, NL, NO, SE) are present and 18 are represented in Dhaka (AT, BE, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HU, ISL, LI, LT, LU, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SK, SL). EL has opened a visa office in Dhaka to receive visa applications that are processed by their embassy in New Delhi.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

EU Delegation, Head of Administration Chairs the LSC meetings and draws up the reports backed up by the European Migration Liaison Officer (EMLO).

Meetings are scheduled on a bi-monthly basis, with the possibility of additional ad hoc meetings if an urgent need arises. Meetings are generally well attended. Occasionally a MS may be absent due to staffing constraints or a heavy workload. The meetings were held physically at the EU Delegation and a number of Member States representations, with the hybrid option of attending via WebEx if requested.

The LSC confirmed to continue with the frequency to hold the meetings 4-5 times a year only. As there is additional exchange via WhatsApp /Signal groups and email in between meetings a more frequently LSC meeting schedule would not improve the quality of exchange nor was deemed necessary. Furthermore, a number of the participants meet in other formats (Admin, Consular, DHoM, Security) as well.

The numbers of visa applications have continuously increased in 2023 and are back to pre-Covid19 level or even higher as many travellers have waited for the travel restrictions to be lifted yet the quality of applications has overall deteriorated. Since DE has started using VFS in May 2023, visa shopping trends with other MS representations have decreased but still occur frequently.

In November, ES has offered a workshop to the LSC conducted by the Home Affairs Attaché and the Deputy Head of Fraud Documents Technical Team from the Spanish Embassy in New Delhi. The workshop focused on detection of fraud documents and illegal migration and was well attended by the LSC group. A number of experts on document verification from different capitals visited Dhaka throughout the year in light of the increasing trends of counterfeit documents.

3. State of play

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3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUD's are well prepared to ensure the tasks to be carried out in LSC under the Visa Code and no specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code focusing on the revised rules applicable since February 2020 have been reported.

Most MS have not reported major challenges to respect the deadlines set by the Visa Code for the different steps of the lodging and examination procedure even though it becomes increasingly demanding given the increasing caseload. However, given the unforeseen increase of requests for national visas, IT flagged to suffer challenges to respect the deadlines.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonized list of supporting documents for visa applications in Bangladesh was adopted on 30.8.2017 and implementation started in September 2017. None of the MS has raised any difficulty with the implementation.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Represented Schengen countries are mostly applying the cascade system as a general rule and recognize that exceptions can be made in specific case.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Although no problems with different visa fees have been observed, MS attempt to harmonize the visa fee in line with the Visa code article 16(7). However, the different national systems do not allow for full implementation of article 16(7). Currently the BDT price for a Schengen visa is between 7.500 and 9.200 BDT (+/- 5 EUR difference) depending on the MS where the application is lodged.

All representations except CH and FR are using the services of VFS (ES uses BLS) and generally experience a good cooperation with the service providers.

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3.5 Exchange of information

MS exchange the following information:

- quarterly statistics are shared by MS via email and afterwards collated by Chair LSC and circulated to all MS and discussed in LSC meetings;
- cases of possible fraud or practical cases or difficulties encountered (during LSC meeting or ad hoc if deemed urgent);
- The group has overall observed that the quality of supporting documents of fraudulent applications have improved and are submitted by the middle class;
- In general the cooperation with local banks to cross check documents is good, but depends on the ability of the local staff charged with that task;
- Due to a high number of fraudulent or false documents (for Schengen and national visa), verification is considered time consuming and increasingly challenging in light of high quality counterfeits;
- Italy is the only Member State that has the possibility to request DNA tests to verify family relations;
- France has changed their application system in 2023 to receive applications online;
- Sweden has recruited an expert on false documents to New Delhi covering Bangladesh;
- Visa and Embassy staff in Dhaka experienced occasionally security and safety issues when interacting with applicants;
- Due to blockades ahead of the national elections held on 7 January 2024, the VFS was partly closed and operations before the elections were subject to the security situation.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The EURLO (European Return Liaison Officer), funded by the AMIF (till 2020) / FRONTEX (from 2021) and hosted by NL has ended his post in January 2022 and a new EURLO has not been appointed.
The EMLO (European Migration Liaison Officer), funded by DE and hosted by EU (SNE post) is posted in Dhaka since October 2020.

Both are an integral part of the LSC Bangladesh and as such invited to all LSC meetings and contribute with their experience especially about migration topics. The EMLO co-chairs the LSC meetings.

4. Challenges

All MS representations continue to frequently face last minute applications submitted by Government representatives. The EUDEL Dhaka has sent a Note Verbale in November 2022 delivering the common message of the Local Schengen Cooperation Group requesting to respect the minimum processing times which has improved the situation for a short period of time but did not show a sustainable improvement. MS representations continue to resend the NV yet the structural problems remains.

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In the beginning of the year, Italy has discovered a practice of falsification of real passports concerning the third page with family information. The issue has been reported to the local authorities as well as Europol and Italian authorities. This particular pattern was not continued throughout the year, but all represented MS reported a high number of fraud attempts. Moreover, considering Document Security Training Programmes for Immigration staff, the detection of fake Schengen Visa, particularly to IT, FR, DE has increased.

5. Other issues

This annual report was drafted by the LSC Chair and commented by LSC MS. All MS in the LSC Bangladesh have approved the final version.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO BELARUS

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in BELARUS
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

14 EU Schengen Member States are present in Belarus: Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovak Republic and Sweden. From non-EU Schengen MSб Switzerland is present as well. Ten Schengen Member States (MS) deliver visas (Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovak Republic). Two new Schengen MS (BG and RO) present in Belarus are to become the Schengen MS and are planning to start issuing visas of 31 March 2024.
Due to expulsion of the LV Embassy from Belarus, only the Consulate in Vitebsk continues to work. Lithuania closed its Consulate in Hrodna due to drastic reduction of all staff and operates in Minsk with one expat capacity, the same as Estonia. The Poland's Consulates in Minsk, Hrodna and Brest operate with significantly limited staff.
As representation is concerned, please note the following:

1. Estonia represents Finland and Sweden;
2. France represents Iceland and Spain (only VIP and urgent);
3. Germany represents Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Slovenia;
4. Hungary represents Switzerland and Liechtenstein;
5. Italy represents Malta;
6. Latvia temporarily suspended all visa representation since March 2022;
7. Slovakia represents Portugal.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During the reporting period, four LSC meetings were held (7 February, 5 May, 5 September and 8 December). The meetings were generally well attended – 13-16 MS attended the meetings in the reporting period. Bulgaria and Romania were invited to the LSC meetings and usually joined.
As previously, EU Delegation (EUDEL) is organising and chairing LSC meetings. EUDEL draws up the meetings' reports and disseminates the draft among LSC members for comments before their final adoption. EUDEL asks MS for input to the meetings' agenda.
MS Consulates outside Minsk are informed about the LSC meetings and related issues via e-mail (they receive meetings' agenda, reports, questions, etc), and participate when possible.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Member States reported no problems in implementation. The Visa Code is being implemented in a well-coordinated manner by the LSC states' consular offices located in Belarus, although the smooth implementation was somehow impacted by the Russian war on Ukraine and staffing limitations imposed by the authorities. Some EUMS were subject to expulsions of their diplomatic and consular staff and can consequently count on limited resources and capacities for issuing visas. Some other MS experience extreme challenges related to a high numbers of applicants, therefore, long waiting times (1.5 – 6 months) are in place.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Commission Implementing Decision as regards the list of supporting documents to be submitted by visa applicants for short stay in Belarus (C(2020) 6149 final) started to be implemented on 21 September 2020. No problems were reported by EUMS in 2023, and there is no need at the moment to amend the existing list.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The Group agreed that currently there was no need to adapt general rules locally in Belarus. Article 24 of the Visa Code and Article 5 of the Visa Facilitation Agreement cover most of categories.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Entry into force of the EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement helped to ensure a harmonised approach, in particular in the area of visa fees. EUMS do not see any need for additional harmonisation exercises at the moment.

3.5 Exchange of information

The LSC and EUDEL regularly shared relevant information in accordance with art 48.3 of the Visa Code. EUMS sent statistics to EUDEL on a quarterly basis. The regular exchange of information within the LSC covered implementation of the Visa Information System, use of VIS Mail, cases of fraud and other relevant issues. EUDEL coordinates a dedicated Signal group for urgent exchange of information.

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After the war on Ukraine started, a number of MS (EE, LV, LT, PL and CZ) continued issuing Schengen visas only for citizens wishing to visit family members in the EU, as well as on humanitarian grounds, e.g., Belarusian citizens suffering from political repressions, serious illness or funeral of a close relative, or other exceptional cases. C type visas can be issued for humanitarian reasons by LT, as well as by the CZ, upon a special permission by the Minister of Interior. Some EUMS focused on issuing D visas. To satisfy a growing demand of visas and to recall the importance of people-to-people contacts by supporting mobility, some EUMS like IT and DE considerably augmented the visas issued, for humanitarian, as well as tourism and business purposes.

Other EUMS reported a constantly increased of the number of applicants. There were some cases of visa shopping, however, with EUMS changing an appointment system, these challenges were almost overcome. The medium refusal rate has generally increased, reaching approx. 3.4% of the total number of applications.

3.6 Any other initiatives taken in LSC

At the proposal of EUDEL, the LSC group jointly visited the LV Consulate General in Vitebsk to familiarize themselves with the functioning of the Consulate and exchange information about the Visa Code application.

4. Challenges

1. The EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) entered into force on 1 July 2020. However, its implementation remains seriously compromised in 2022 by the political situation, especially after the war on Ukraine started. The Council decision of 11 November 2021 on partially suspending the application of the EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation Agreement remained in place. EUMS did not report on attempts to circumvent this Council decision.

2. The understaffing of some EUMS consular sections, especially of neighbouring MS with BY caused by deteriorating bilateral relations and BY requesting to decrease the number of diplomatic staff, significantly increased the burden on operating EUMS and limited access of Belarusian citizens to Schengen visas.

3. The unilateral visa free regime by BY for LV, LT and PL continued to be in place. Despite warnings by the authorities, people used quite actively this opportunity and some were detained and politically prosecuted. Due to worsening political relationships, EUMS consular staff was unable to provide effective consular support. However, the consular access started to slightly improve in the beginning of 2024.

The report was approved by the Member States on 27 February 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 17 EU MS/SAC diplomatic missions present in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) [Austria (AT), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Italy (IT), Hungary (HU), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Sweden (SE), Switzerland (CH) and Norway (NO)]. The consular section of NL covers Luxembourg (LU) and Belgium (BE) in terms of visas, while the consular section of HU covers Lithuania (LT) and Estonia (EE), AT covers Malta (MT), SE covers Denmark (DK) and Slovenia covers Switzerland (CH) and Portugal (PT). Even though BG and RO are not yet part of the Schengen area, they have diplomatic missions in BiH and were invited to participate the LSC meetings.

In 2023 there were no longer Covid-19 measures in force as the World Health Organization declared the end of pandemic.

Implementation of visa-free regime between EU and BiH did not reveal any issues. BiH made a certain progress in further harmonizing its visa policy with the EU/Visa Acquis through introduction of visa regime to Bahrein and Oman[4]. Backsliding was made through introduction of seasonal visa-free regime for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In October 2023 the United Arab Emirates introduced visa-free regime for BiH citizens. EU was actively engaged in development and adoption processes of legal and strategic frameworks of border and migration management policies, most of them only finalized and only a few of them adopted since the last report. Efforts invested in starting negotiations with EU/EC on the Model Status Agreement and the Working Arrangement revealed limited results with the processes still ongoing.

On returns and readmission, in 2023 number of both forced and assisted/voluntary return operations increased, whilst readmission operations to Pakistan remained limited. EU financed most of the forced returns, whilst the assisted voluntary returns were mostly supported by IOM. Negotiations with other countries of origin on readmission agreements or other arrangements in this context did not reveal tangible results.

On readmission with neighbouring countries, 'shortened' readmission procedures from HR have intensified in 2023, whilst the 'shortened' procedures with SER and MNE revealed very limited results.

[4] Initiative from MoS to the BiH CoM for Oman was forwarded in December 2023 but the decision was made in the CoM's session of 11 Jan 2024.

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2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In 2023 the EU House (EU Special Representative's Office and EU Delegation) hosted two well attended in-person LSC meetings, namely on 24 April and 20 November. The EU House continued to cooperate with the EUMS/SAC on different subjects using regular information channels, including in cooperation with EU institutions in MHQ/Brussels as well.

Meeting reports were distributed to EUMS/SAC and appropriate institutions in MHQ/Brussels. No ad-hoc meetings were organized in 2023.

It is important to say that EUMS/SAC were provided opportunities to proactively discuss open issues in the meeting on wide variety of subjects, especially security and political situation that might have effects on daily operations of the missions.

In framework of the LSC, the EU House organized and hosted two trainings for consular/visa sections' staff of EUMS/SAC on document security policy/forgery of travel documents. Objectives of the Awareness Raising Session and the Consular Staff Training conducted by FRONTEX Training Unit's experts were to update participants on latest trends on forgeries and role of the consular/visa staff in overall security system in BiH, EU and wider. Objectives of the trainings were achieved with very positive feedback on their contents and quality.

Since LSC Annual Report 2022 we can recognize some tangible but limited results that local authorities made with an intensive facilitation of the EU House in visa, integrated border management and migration management policies. Details are provided in the text below.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EUMS/SAC did not report any issues regarding the application of the EU Visa Code, including its changes of Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 dated 20 June 2019.

Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the Schengen Zone as of 1 January 2023 did not cause any significant changes in application of the Visa Code or implementation of visa policy in daily consular operations.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EUMS/SAC did not report any issues related to harmonized list of supporting documents.

Communication with the Visa Committee did not reveal any related issues neither.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

EUMS/SAC did not report any problems on application of Article 24 in the reporting period.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Information received from EUMS/SAC suggest that all practices were harmonized to the highest possible extent following the Visa Code provisions, including its annexes.

Local authorities did not suspend limited (30-days) visa-free regime with Russia in framework of the EU sanctions.
Temporary humanitarian residence for Ukrainian citizens is still in force. Number of asylum applications filed remains rather low compared to the total number of incoming and outgoing Ukrainian citizens.

3.5 Exchange of information

Analysis of visa statistics revealed that number of visas issued by EUMS/SAC in 2023 significantly increased compared to 2022, as provided in the following discussion:

- Single-entry 'C' visas (2022 - 260) / (2023 - 305) = **17, 3 % increase**,
- Multiple entry 'C' visas (2022 - 1363) / (2023 - 2005) = **47, 1 % increase,**
- Limited Terr. Validity (LTV) visas (2022 - 5) / (2023 - 0) = 100 % decrease, and
- Long-term (D) visas (2022 – 18.555) / (2023 – 18.632) = **0, 4 % increase.**

Visa application percentages proportionally correspond the aforesaid issuing statistics, with a slight deviations for a longer visa application assessment processes, including leftovers from 2022. We have to take in consideration the fact that some of the EUMS/SAC did not provide their visas statistics until the moment of writing this report.

Compared to the previous reporting period, the most important changes the EUMS/SAC were informed on were explained as in the following text:

Visa policy in BiH

In the reporting period, the EUMS/SAC were informed on situation with commercial intermediaries and facilitation of visa application processes in BiH diplomatic network. Special emphasis was set on implementation of the previously adopted Book of Rules on Issuing 'C' Visas and 'A' Visas. EU Office also shared important entry/exit statistics and related differences between incoming and outgoing foreigners coming from high migratory risk countries [TR, CHI etc.]. EUMS/SAC were informed on efforts of EU in aligning visa policy of BiH with the EU/Visa Acquis and implications of the results achieved on overall security situation in BiH, the Western Balkans Region and the EU. In order to fully harmonize visa-free policy with the EU/Visa Acquis, BiH should revoke visa-free regimes with Azerbaijan, China, Kuwait, Russia, Saudi Arabia [seasonal], Turkey and Qatar. On EU

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level, there were no significant changes as full adoption of the EU Pact on Migration is still pending.

Document Security policy

There were no significant changes in the Document Security policy of BiH as legal framework on procurement of travel documents is still to be adjusted to the public procurement legislation. Unlike the travel documents, procurement process for BiH national visa stickers has been improved through provisions of the Law on Foreigners adopted in 2023.

Integrated Border Management (IBM) policy

The new Law on Border Crossing Control had been rejected in the Parliamentary procedure and internal discussion in its provisions is still ongoing for political disagreements. Tangible improvements were made in the Risk Analysis process through finalization of the Risk Analysis Training Cycle that resulted in 72 officers trained on CIRAM 2.0 risk analysis and finalized drafting of the Instruction on Risk Analysis in the BiH Border Police. Technical talks on the new Working Arrangement are still ongoing. On the Status Agreement, local authorities adopted the Joint negotiation platform and appointed the BiH negotiation team. EUMS/SAC were updated on policy-level issues and their impact on overall security system in BiH, Region and EU in a wider context.

Migration policy

EUMS/SAC were regularly updated on migratory trends, statistics, human smuggling, human trafficking and other related crimes related to migratory movements through the BiH territory. Local authorities continued talks with multiple countries of origin of migrants on readmission agreements, e.g. Bangladesh, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia but without significant tangible results. Returns from BiH in general context improved with financial assistance of mostly EU and implementing partners. Technical talks on joint returns/flights through different mechanisms did not reveal tangible results. In 2023, BiH registered significant increase of migrants compared to 2022 for changes in movements on the WB Route, including border measures and operations on the SER/HU borders. Lack of different sources in law enforcement agencies in the BiH and the WB Region significantly contributed to this security issue.

3.5 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Besides the Awareness Raising Session and the Consular Staff Training, no other special initiatives were taken in 2023.

4. Challenges

In 2023 as of the last Annual Report, the EU Office focused its facilitation and advisory expertise on achieving the following [Key] Priorities:

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1. Technical talks on the Model Status Agreement between EU and BiH,
2. Technical talks on the new Working Arrangement between BiH Border Police and FRONTEX [FTX] and deployment of FTX Standing Corps officers to BiH,
3. Further alignment of the BiH visa policy with the 'White Schengen List' that resulted in *termination of visa-free regimes with Bahrein and Oman [01/2023]*, but also in backsliding through *introduction of (seasonal) visa-free regime with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*,
4. Full adoption of the *new Strategy and Action Plan on Migration and Asylum 2021-2025*,
5. Full adoption of the *new Law on Foreigners* further aligned with the EU Acquis,
6. Drafting of the new Law on Border Crossing Control and its harmonization with the EU/Schengen Acquis that resulted in *rejection in the parliamentary adoption process*,
7. Full implementation of the *Risk Analysis Training Cycle* process and finalization of the drafting the Instruction on Risk Analysis fully harmonized with CIRAM 2.0 methodology, and
8. Remained actively engaged in all aspects of migratory movements and trends in BiH, including fight against illegal migration.

In 2024, besides the opening chapter negotiations as the ultimate objective, the EU Office will focus on the following objectives:

1. Finalization of negotiations and signing the Status Agreement between BiH and EU,
2. Signing of the Working Arrangement between BiH Border police and FRONTEX,
3. To support adoption of the Law on Border Control and related bylaws,
4. To support establishment of the Advanced Passenger Information [API] system in BiH,
5. To support signing of the Roadmap for cooperation with EU Asylum Agency,
6. To support signing and implementation of the Instruction for Risk Analysis in the BiH Border Police,
7. To support improvement of the Joint Risk Analysis Centre's capacities and related process,
8. To support implementation and improvement of migration management policy in BiH,
9. To support introduction of biometric visas in BiH Diplomatic and Consular Offices.

5. Other issues

No other issues of a specific importance raised by the EUMS/SAC.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO BRAZIL

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in BRAZIL
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Twenty-three Schengen Member States are present in Brazil and twenty-two have a representation in the capital, Brasilia. Lithuania has a Consulate in São Paulo. Estonia, Latvia, Iceland and Liechtenstein do not have embassies / consulates in Brazil.

Sixteen Schengen Member States (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, F, HU, IE, IT, LIT, NL, and PT) have official Consulates in **São Paulo**.

Ten Schengen Member States (BE, CH, ES, F, DE, IT, NL, NO, PT, RO) have official Consulates in **Rio de Janeiro**.

Three Schengen Member States (DE, F, IT) have official consulates in the city of **Recife;** 3 Schengen Member States (DE, ES, IT) have official consulates in **Porto Alegre;** 2 Schengen Member States (IT, PL), have official consulates in the city of **Curitiba;** 2 Schengen Member States (IT and PT) have official consulates in **Belo Horizonte,** and 2 Schengen Member States (ES and PT) have official consulates in the city of **Salvador**.

HU and Liechtenstein are represented for Schengen visas by CH, and LUX is represented by BE. Schengen visa applications for NO and SE are centralised at the Norwegian Consulate General in New York, USA.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In the absence of the identification of necessary topics for discussion, no Schengen coordination meetings were organised. Schengen members present in Brasilia (CH, NO) participated in ad hoc visits to the Brazilian Federal Police's international centre for migration control cooperation.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Thanks to the EU-Brazil Schengen visa waiver agreement, there are no Schengen visa-related specific problems and there is little perceived need to discuss visa code related questions amongst Schengen Member States. The Visa Information System (VIS) is implemented. The requirement for collecting biometric details meant that in some cases visa applicants needed to travel farther (considering Brazil's size), in order to satisfy this requirement.

Member States apply different exchange rates and update them with different regularity, mostly according to instructions from their capitals, which makes it difficult to have one uniform visa fee in the local currency. However, the differences in fees are not significant and they did not lead to 'visa shopping'.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The European Commission adopted the decision on harmonised list of supporting documents for Brazil in September 2016. So far, Member States in Brazil have not expressed the need to amend the existing list.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Some Member States encourage the delivery of multiple-entry visas under Article 24(2) of the visa Code (MEV cascades). There is for the time being no perceived need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Most visas are issued in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, followed by Brasilia. As mentioned above, thanks to the EU-Brazil Schengen visa waiver agreement, Schengen visa-related problems do not constitute a major issue in the local consular work. So far, no harmonisation of practices has taken place, nor is there appetite to do so.

3.5 Exchange of information

The exchange of information within the LSC can be swiftly activated when needed, through hybrid meetings, as well as WhatsApp groups. Member States used VIS Mail.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Not applicable

4. Challenges

No particular challenges regarding the Schengen cooperation were observed. Schengen Member States are encouraged and invited to propose topics for the agendas of LSC.

5. Other issues

Not applicable.

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION AU BURKINA FASO

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) au BURKINA FASO
RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

Au Burkina Faso, quatre Etats membres de l'espace Schengen délivrent normalement des visas (BE, DE, DK, FR), avec traditionnellement la France gérant le plus grand nombre et représentant également neuf autres Etats membres à travers des accords de représentation en matière de visas Schengen (AT, ES, EE, EL, IT, LT, MT, PT, CZ).
La coopération locale Schengen (LSC) s'est tenue depuis quelques années d'une façon informel entre les quatre consulats présents, basé sur des efforts précédents au niveau de l'harmonisation de gestion des demandes et des pièces justificatives, avec la participation de la DUE avant 2018.
Suite aux attaques violents contre ambassade et consulat de France en Novembre 2022, la France avait annoncé une suspension des accords de représentation. Alors que la délivrance des visas a été repris un moment donné partiellement, les services visas français restent désormais fermés et reçoivent les demandes uniquement par dérogation et exceptionnellement.
Suite au risque accrue de 'visa shopping' et une croissance de demande auprès des autres consulats, il y aura probablement un besoin et intérêt de reprise de réunions de coordination LSC en 2024.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

Il n'y a pas eu des réunion formelles LSC en 2023.

3. État des lieux

Il n'y a pas normalement des problèmes particuliers au niveau d'harmonisation de procédures et des documents.
Suite à la fermeture des services visas de la France, les consulats des trois Etats membres qui continuent de délivrer des visas (BE, DE, DK) ont constatés pendant toute l'année 2023 une augmentation significative des demandes de visas touristiques et pour visite en famille. Il y a également une augmentation de la documentation frauduleuse.

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4. Défis

Suite au risque accrue de ‘visa shopping’ et une croissance de demande auprès des autres consulats, il y aura probablement un besoin et intérêt de reprise de réunion de coordination LSC en 2024.

5. Divers

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF CABO VERDE

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in CABO VERDE
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Cabo Verde is a small archipelagic, lower middle-income country with well-functioning democratic institutions and overall good governance. In 2007 it was launched a Special Partnership Cabo Verde/EU and in parallel it was agreed a Mobility Partnership (2008). A Visa Facilitation Agreement (VFA) and a Readmission Agreement entered into force on 1 December 2014. Following an evaluation in 2018 and extended negotiations, an amendment to the Visa Facilitation Agreement, entered into force on 1st July 2022.

There are four resident Member State Embassies in Cabo Verde: Spain, France, Luxembourg and Portugal. Many EU MSs have ambassadors in Dakar and Lisbon accredited to Cabo Verde and there is a dense network (17) of EU honorary consulates in the different islands of the country. Portugal runs the Common Visa Centre (CCV) in Praia, which receives Schengen visa requests for 19 Schengen countries.

Spain does not participate in the CCV and has its own consular section in Praia. Both Spain (trough honorary consuls) and Portugal offer the possibility to present applications in other islands, which are eventually processed in Praia. The CCV, in fact, sends officials and equipment to receive Visa applications to several islands (São Vicente, Sal and Boa Vista and in some occasions to Fogo). There is good cooperation between Portugal (CCV) and Spain in cases where further information on refusals/applicants is needed, as well as on any other question of common interest.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During the reporting period, fewer LSC and LCC regular meetings were organised taking into account other relevant meetings that took place in Praia.

The 5th meeting of the EU-Cabo Verde Joint Readmission Committee back-to-back with the Joint Visa Facilitation Committee took place on 9 March 2023. The meetings were attended by all resident MSs (PT, LU, ES, FR), EU HQs colleagues (DG HOME C1 and B4), and, on the CV side, representatives from different state authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Migration Service, State Border Service, Embassy in Brussels..).

The CVC received a Schengen evaluation mission covering both Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau in April. EUDEL and other EU MSs were associated to some aspects of this evaluation.

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The new and modern premises of CVC opened in April 2023. In November, PT invited all resident and non-resident EU HoMs to visit the CCV, and both the Secretaries of State for Communities from Portugal and Cabo Verde were present.

On the other hand, the rotation of staff in the different missions and several events linked to the inauguration of the new facilities of the CVC had brought to a discontinuation of the LCC meetings. In November 2023, the EUDEL organised a meeting, inter alia, aiming to introduce the newly appointed PT and FR consular focal points, as well as the Portuguese seconded coordinator of the CVC. To recall that Portugal is the destination of most (over 90%) of the Schengen visa applications received in the country, besides their own National and CPLP visa schemes.

The efforts to improve the CVC functioning have been largely appreciated, especially concerning the management of high visas volume. Several improvements followed the recommendations received from last April Schengen Evaluation. Some measures included the facilitation of booking online appointments; online checking of certificates and other documents; short interviews by the staff regarding the applicant's profile and, finally, the reinforcement of the number of visa analysts in place.

The CCV and the Portuguese and Spanish consular sections only resumed regular issuing of Schengen Visas at the beginning of 2022. Since then, the number of Visa applications had escalated overloading the CCV and the Spanish Consular section. However, the situation has progressively stabilized all through the year 2023 with figures approaching pre-pandemic levels. The entry into force of the simplified procedures included in the amendment to the Visa Facilitation Agreement (1st July 2022) and the reinforcement of staff have contributed to cope with a situation, that nevertheless remains chronically challenging, and sensitive, in particular as regards the CCV.

In 2023, CVC received a total 16,299 requests, among online bookings, "Balcão Azul" requests and waivers for multiple entries visas. CVC keeps receiving several requests out of the scope of the Schengen Agreement, as well as requests with insufficient or false supporting documents. For these reasons, rates of refusal have, albeit diminishing, have remained relatively high (23,6%) calculated as the ratio between number of visas granted / number of visas applied for. While the refusal rate is still a problematic issue, extrapolations on per capita terms should be put into perspective in the context of a country with very low population (around ½ a million), and a long standing tradition of travelling to the EU.

The **ES** Consular Section had received an unusual high number of requests in 2022, likely due to the overburden of the CVC. In 2023, despite a progressive return to normal, the situation remains challenging, with a good number of wrongly placed requests received by ES consulate, while certainly intended for CVC. Indeed, applicants often recur to ES consulate in case of difficulties in booking appointments via CVC or due to misinformation. The situation also explains the high rate of visa refusal from ES consular section (around 38%).

Both CVC and ES consular section have carried out initiatives to tackle misinformation and improve better access to information of procedures and aiming to reduce the number of invalid visa requests.

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In previous meetings, EUDEL and EMs singled out misinformation as one of the main root cause for visa refusal rates and agreed to work on improving effective communication on the preferential EU visa regime, as well as on national and CPLP alternative frameworks. This would also tackle the misleading expectation among the population that the EU-CV Visa Facilitation Agreement grants unconditional travelling rights. Cooperation of CV authorities and possible financial and technical support from DG HOME will be considered.

FR opened in Praia an office of its service provider for national visas (managed by their Embassy in Senegal) last autumn, which is receiving a limited number of requests (35-40 per month) for long-term national visas. It is, however, expected an increase in demand with the new university mobility campaigns. **LU** provides support to CVC in the analysis of Schengen Visa requests involving LU. The LU Embassy in Portugal processes long-term national visa requests although applicants can present their application at the embassy in Cabo Verde. .

For **the upcoming year**, EUDEL and EU MSs agreed to continue the practice of organising back-to-back meetings on Schengen Coordination and Consular coordination and to keep a trimestral periodicity of meetings. PT will continue its usual lead in chairing the LCC Group. To recall that PT has traditionally held a relevant role and a generalised presence in Cabo Verde, including on consular matters.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Both, the CCV and the Spanish Consular Section have quickly integrated the new rules introduced by the amended Visa Facilitation Agreement, notably as regards, reduction of fees, simplification of required documents and facilitation of multiple-entries visas.

On 9 March 2023, the (steering) committees of the Visa Facilitation and the Readmission EU /CV agreements were held in Praia. All EU missions in Praia participated in both meetings. The next VFA annual meeting will take place in Brussels. The overall successful outcome of the committee took note, among others of the return to pre-pandemic visa levels and the normalisation of consular work, in particular as regards treatment of visa requests. EUDEL expressed some concern, however, about the co-chairing of both committees by CV Ambassador in Brussels, which could indicate that the CV Consular services at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MNECIR) might not be familiar with the agreements' procedures.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

A harmonised list of supporting documents is in place, and has been updated in line with the amended Visa Facilitation Agreement.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Article 4 of the amended Visa Facilitation Agreement EU Cabo Verde contains different provisions that simplify and facilitate issuing of multiple-entry visas. Since its entry into force on 1st July 2022 the number and rapidity of concession of multiple-entry visas has sensibly increased. The proportion of these visas was already high (about 50% of Schengen Visas issued) and it is expected to further increase.

A specific issue in Cabo Verde is the fact that national passports have a maximum validity of five years, which renders difficult to issue 5-year and 4-year multiple-entry visas.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Given the fact that the Common Visa Centre receives and processes requests for Schengen visas for 19 Schengen countries, there is a large degree of harmonisation of practices in place. This applies also to the Spanish Consular Section.

Issues such as the treatment of visa requests related to binational marriages or to minors travelling without their parents are regularly discussed, but not specific harmonisation measures have been taken yet.

3.5 Exchange of information

During all LSC meetings, a regular exchange of information takes place. This includes:

- visa statistics;
- overall trends in visa applications, seasonal variations;
- cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies);
- cases of fraud, in particular false documents and "mariages blancs" and an exchange of best practices on how to discover and minimize such frauds;

- issues related to visa-shopping, and the presence of external operators that seem to monopolize the on-line reservation of slots for appointments to the CCV.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Other topics addressed included the visit of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) representatives to CVC premises in October 2023 with FR, PT and EUDEL. The OFII mission aimed to introduce the project of financial support for the return of migrants, in particular those in irregular situation, namely through financial incentives and employability opportunities. The OFII proposal is currently being discussed between FR, the Government of CV and interested MSs. Still one mission to CV took place in February 2024.

Morever, LSC meetings also provided the opportunity to discuss the ongoing assessment of third countries' level of cooperation on readmission in 2022 provided for in Article 25. of the Visa Code. The assessment carried out periodically by the Council (COCON) is provided for countries with particularly high levels of migration to the EU or/and for countries such as CV which have visa facilitation agreements. Besides Cabo Verde, eight other Western Africa countries are also covered by the ongoing exercise. EUDEL has invited MSs to contact their capitals to address developments of the file.

Ongoing work on Local Consular Coordination, such as the updating of EU JCPF, or the outreach in view of the European Elections of June have also a positive reflect in the LSC areas.

4. Challenges

There are structural challenges since Cabo Verde, albeit a small country is an archipelago with nine inhabited islands and severe connectivity and transport issues. Inhabitants of the other islands have serious difficulties to move to the capital Praia to request visas. After the COVID 19 impasse, the CCV has resumed the offer of its services in other islands. It sends officials and equipment to receive Visa applications every month to São Vicente, every two months to Sal and every four months to Boa Vista. Fogo has also received some visits.

The CCV had undergone a difficult situation during 2022 to cope with an always-increasing number of visa applications (more than triple than the previous year). In 2023, some of the previously identified challenges remain, in particular as regards the online booking of visa appointments. The situation has been highly criticised as some local operators reserve most available slots to offer to or negotiate afterwards with the individual applicants. The situation is even more worrisome as it leads to unfounded accusations of CVC selling visa appointments. Another challenge raised is the number of false documentation being forged to support visa requests. However, the reinforcement of staff and the relocation in March 2023 to new upgraded and more functional premises have contributed to improve the situation. In addition, CVC staff has been trained to better identify wrong testimonies about the applicant's personal data and professional experience during interviews.

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Indeed, the visa issue remains one of the difficult topics in the otherwise excellent relations between Cabo Verde and the EU, as well as bilaterally between Cabo Verde and its Member States, in particular Portugal.

The rules of the Visa Code and the Visa Facilitation Agreement are applied correctly, but many Cabo Verdean applicants feel treated unfairly when their requests are refused. Further information campaigns, agreed with local authorities, would be positive to clarify the existing rules and procedures and to warn over excessive expectations.

To recall that, at the time of the conclusion of the EU-CV Visa Facilitation Agreement in 2014, it seems that unrealistic expectations had been raised in the domestic political arena. This, in turn led to a certain degree of frustration among the population. Albeit the Government recognises the positive effect of the entry into force of the Amended Visa Facilitation Agreement, the ambition of Cabo Verde of acceding in the future to a Visa-waiver/Visa-free regime is a recurrent topic in all formal political dialogues in the framework of the EU/Cabo Verde Special Partnership.

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EUROPEAN UNION/UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION TO CANADA/DELEGATION AU CANADA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in CANADA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

25 EU Member States (MS), together with Switzerland, Iceland and Norway, are represented in Ottawa. Luxembourg and Malta do not have embassies in Ottawa. Luxembourg has an Honorary Consul. Malta has a Consul General in Toronto.

Many MS have an established network of Consulates in other large Canadian cities, with a bulk of their consular and Schengen visa work conducted in the large metropolitan areas of Toronto and Montreal, as well as in Vancouver. Some MS are present as well in Quebec, Calgary and/or Edmonton. Honorary Consuls are present throughout many other Canadian cities.

MS have *ad-hoc* cooperation agreements allowing one MS to issue visas on behalf of another. Several MS have also engaged with private companies to handle the receipt of visa applications, including recording biometric. Several Schengen visa hubs have been established in major cities across Canada at this point.

In an effort to centralise visa processing regionally, some MS have also reorganised internally and now conduct the processing of visas at their missions in the US, while the physical aspects of this process (sticker print, shipping, etc.) remains at the diplomatic missions in Canada.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LCC and LSC meetings are organized jointly, one after another, in a hybrid format. In 2023, 3 LCC and LSC meetings took place in April, June and November. For each meeting, there was a regular participation of outside parties who briefed on topics of interest (for the last meeting in November, GAC colleagues briefed on the impacts of Canada joining the Apostille Convention as of January 2024).

All meetings LCC/LSC have been very well attended (practically 100 % of EU and Schengen countries), with participation beyond the Ottawa embassy and with regular participation of colleagues from General Consulates in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

The meetings have been chaired jointly by the EU Delegation and the MS ensuring the rotating EU Presidency of the Council. Reporting of these meetings have been issued. The Group exchanges information by email. Except for the EU and Schengen states, no other countries participated to the meetings.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The *unification* of MS work under the Visa Code is deemed advanced. Some elements to flag:
- full and commonly applied usage of the visa application form in line with the Visa Code;
- discrepancies in the requirements for fingerprints' taking in the re-applications;
- discrepancies in the interview process (different process applied by MS);
- existence of additional declarations to be signed (or questionnaires to be filled in) by applicants - in addition to the main application form and the supporting documents as mentioned in the harmonized list of documents. Within the framework of the LSC Schengen, partners can still agree on additional forms to be used by all Schengen partners.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Commission Implementing Decision on the Harmonised List was adopted in 2019. The LSC group is informed that the list is mandatory and must be advertised on the diplomatic missions websites. A proposal to harmonise the lists of supporting document has been agreed on 22 December 2023 and forwarded to the Visa Committee.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In 2023, there were some on-going discussions amongst the Group as regards a possible simplification of the current MEV cascade. Ways of adaptation were discussed as regards 1/ the possible issuance of a 5 years-valid Multi-Entry Visas to applicants who fulfilled all requirements of a "correctly used 1 year visa" (no overstaying, no abuses, timely requests), the holder of permanent residency and 2/holders of permanent residency in Canada. There was no consensus on the process and further discussion will take place to envisage if we shall pursue with a proposal for adaptation of the model.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Several MS reiterated their concern as regards the issue of visa-shopping. MS see the value added of keeping each other closely informed about potential visa shopping.

MS discussed the process of interview for visa application, recalling that it is a possibility and not an obligation under article 21 of the current Visa Code regulation[5]. Some MS informed of their practice of only conducting a physical interview for the first application but not for the subsequent applications.

[5] REGULATION (EC) No 810/2009 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:243:0001:0058:en:PDF

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MS also discussed the audit/inspection system of the outsourced visa-centers and expressed interest in collectively receiving the feedback of this process.

3.5 Exchange of information

Statistics have not been regularly compiled throughout 2023. The practice will be resumed in 2024. No cases of fraud were reported to the EU DEL or brought to a broad LSC forum.

Exchanges have taken place with Canadian stakeholders throughout the year on topics of interest (Immigration, Apostille Convention). Exchanges of information were performed about the practices as regard travellers to/from Ukraine/Russia (some UKR bordering states do not have direct connection to Canada, some MS are not receiving RUS applications).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Discussions took place on the EES/ETIAS system as this is a topic with a high impact for Canada given the number of travellers between Canada and the Schengen space, but also the number of binational. MS had (and received) consequently numerous questions for which the information available were provided: 1/conclusions of the JHA meeting in October 2023 for the planed starting date of the process and 2/ the EU official ETIAS website for content. A dedicated meeting will be organized when EUDEL will receive a package of information from Brussels on that point. MS agreed that an increase of passports

4. Challenges

Many MS informed that they faced a high number of demands during summer 2023, which was the first summer without any COVID related restrictions, while their staff remains at the same level as in the last years. There was a consensus to say that this trend of such high volume visa demands will continue in the future. MS agreed that at least a seasonal manpower support would be expected from their HQs. Some MS propose that the EU could create/coordinate/support a team of “EU officials” to deal with rising numbers of Schengen visa applications.

Some MS informed that they are facing an increase in demands from Ukrainians citizen who plan to fly back to their home country with connecting flights in the Schengen space.

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5. Other issues

MS discussed the issue faced by all diplomats newly posted to Canada as regards the accreditation process, with the prerequisite of obtaining a temporary resident visa and communicating a massive number of data (diplomats being considered as economic migrant with no special status by Immigration Canada). One MS informed that it has summoned the CAN ambassador in their capital to request an update of the procedure in line with the Vienna Convention and the principle of reciprocity and courtesy. At local level, the Group agreed that the topic is a protocol issue and not a consular and recommend to engage the HoMs to further discuss the topic. Contacts with IRCC could be facilitated via the Group.

---------*ENDS*----------

This report has been approved by Member States during a silence procedure conducted launched on February 28 and closed on March 12 of the year 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO CHILE

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in CHILE
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

18 Member States are present in Chile (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden) with an Embassy in Santiago. A number of countries have honorary consuls across the country.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

The meetings, chaired by the EU Delegation (Head of Political Section) at the request of rotating Presidencies, have been held once a semester and have been well attended.

EU Member States present in Chile, and Schengen non EU Member states (Norway, Switzerland) participate in the meetings. One meeting was held in a more extensive format with participation of consuls from Australia, Canada, New-Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States specifically dedicated to the issue of the security situation in Chile. The EU DEL sent a report of the meetings to the participating countries.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EU Member States did not report any issues regarding the application of the EU Visa Code, including its recent changes [Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of 20 June 2019]. The EU has an automatic tourist visa of 90 days for Chilean.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EU Member States did not report any problems regarding the harmonization of documents and related practices.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No particular problem was highlighted on this topic.

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3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Based on the information received by member states all practices are harmonized following the Visa code.

3.5 Exchange of information

All the meetings held provide a space to share information on visa practice and/or implementation of new regulations by the government of Chile.

There are little cases of fraud reported in the meetings.

Due to Chile's increasing number of immigrants from neighbouring and other countries (e.g. Bolivia, Cuba, Haiti etc.) there is slight increase of so far unproblematic Schengen visa applicants from foreigners resident in Chile.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The meetings provided an opportunity to exchange on the deterioration of the security situation in the country, and its impact on European citizens, as well as the procedures in place in Chile in case of natural disasters.

4. Challenges

The new immigration act in force since February 12th, 2022 along with a new electronic visa and residence permits online application system continue to create backlog and long waiting time which are specifically difficult for incoming students and expats working for European companies with branches in Chile.

5. Other issues

In 2022**, a Joint Consular Framework (JCF) for Chile was agreed by the Heads of Mission in Chile and transmitted to the COCON working Group. It will be updated in 2024.**

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO CHINA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in CHINA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

27 EU Member States + Switzerland, Iceland and Norway are present in China and all of them are represented in Beijing. There are EU MS Consulates General in the following cities: Shanghai (24), Guangzhou (13), Hong Kong (12), Chengdu (6), Chonqing (3), Shenyang (2), Macao (1) and Wuhan (1).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In 2023 there were held 7 meetings (10 February, 30 March, 1 June, 6 July, 28 September, 16 November and 14 December). All of them were well attended by at least 20 MS, and co-chaired by the Presidency and the EU Delegation. One of the meetings as attended by representatives of the Consular Department of the Chinese MFA in order to deliver a presentation on China's ratification of the Apostille convention. The Spanish Presidency organized a special meeting with Latin American Consuls.
Reports were drawn up by the Delegation and consulted with the Presidency.
Coordination with the LSC in locations outside the capital is done by MS. Most cities with EU presence hold local LSC meetings.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The year 2023 saw the reopening of Chinese borders and the concomitant increase in visa applications from Chinese travelers wishing to travel to the Schengen area. The reopening of Chinese borders came rather unexpected at the end of 2022 – this resulted in many MS being unprepared to deal with the sudden increase in the number of applications as a result of many years of lower demand (which resulted in many MS having downsized their visa operations). The logical consequence was increased waiting times and visa shopping with those MS who did have more appointments available than others.

Most MS make use of external service providers (VFS serving most of the MS, TLS serving only 2 MS and BLS serving 1 MS) – there do not appear to be any significant issues to report regarding the ESPs.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In Beijing, the harmonisation of lists has been completed by local LSC meeting, but is pending a formal decision by the Commission.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

A specific cascade for Chinese nationals has been adopted by local LSC cooperation, but is still pending formal decision by the Commission.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

During the beginning of 2023 most restrictions of COVID-19 pandemic situation have been lifted. Most MS reported an increase of applications but in variable amounts. As of February 6, 2023, ADS groups can travel to some European countries for tourism purpose following a decision by Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Peoples Republic of China. The approvals for which countries they were allowed to travel came in different occasions during the year.

An increased post-pandemic demand for travel to the EU/Schengen area, especially during the summer season, affected the workload of some MS. The volume of visa applications increased and some MS reporting a very high workload and difficulties with visa appointments around the summer season. In this respect, the waiting times for visa appointments at some MS were quite long during periods.

Subsequently, visa shopping was a major problem and refusal rates increased. Determining the main destination for the purpose of the visa applications was an issue discussed among MS. Problem with supporting documents such as fake/ forged were also reported by MS around the summer season.

3.5 Exchange of information

Following the resumption of demand in China (after the COVID lockdown), the practice of collecting and sharing statistics has been resumed. Most MS share their statistics on a punctual basis with the PRES.

During the LSC meetings, MS regularly share information regarding cases of fraud / visa shopping and other trends that are being detected.

The use of VISMail was discussed – for some countries the use of VISMail was deemed to be suboptimal (this may be due to national interface). A list of contacts of all Visa sections was established, to allow for exchange of information in the case of non-functioning VISMail (or in case of urgent need).). Requests via VISMAIL from central authorities are attended by Schengen Consulates.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

EU-China Dialogue on Migration and Mobility, third phase of the project debriefs by EUDEL.

MS agreed to share monthly visa statistics.

A working group was created to update the JWF which was later presented at LSC/LCC meeting.

4. Challenges

Due to 'zero-Covid policy' 2022 was a difficult year, as a result of various travel restrictions all over China. Flight suspensions were imposed, along with centralised quarantines to all inbound travelers and lockdowns, in order to prevent the spreading of the virus. At the beginning of 2023, after China has opened the borders, travel restrictions were abolished, and the international travels slowly started to recover. Thus, one of the main challenges for 2023 was to increase the number of staff at the Visa Sections of the Embassies and at the external service providers (*due to COVID and the decrease of the Schengen visa applications, most Capitals reduced the number of staff members*), along with overviewing the harmonized list of supporting documents and the common use of the cascade system. In general, as several MS experience lack of human resources, the waiting time to submit a Schengen visa application was months, which also contributed to visa-shopping. Along with the increase of the Schengen visa applications, continuous and various documents (bank account statements, flight tickets, accommodation, etc.) forgery appeared.

5. Other issues

Many Consulates are overloaded with visa applications on "public affairs passports" (PAPs), as per agreement with the Chinese side, they are not to be handed at the VACs.

The legal status of this practice is subject to bilateral exchanges of NV that took place at the time the opening of VACs was authorized. There was an agreement between China and MS that PAPs should be processed in Embassies and Consulates, not in VACs. European attempt to change the situation in 2019 was rejected.

MS are dealing with this matter on bilateral basis. Some of them have already managed to process PAP visa applications at the VACs. A joint demarche, such as the one of 2019, is not in the agenda.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO COLOMBIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in COLOMBIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

16 Member States (MS) are present, i.e. Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Spain and Switzerland.

Eight MS are represented for Schengen visa applications, i.e.
- Slovenia and Latvia (via Germany)
- Malta (via Italy)
- Estonia (via Poland)
- Denmmark, Finland, Island and Norway (via Sweden).
- Greece, Lithuania and Slovakia (via Spain)

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

After the Covid-19 pandemic, LSC meetings in presence resumed in 2023. Two meetings were held under the chair of the EU Delegation, which also drew up the reports. The meetings were well attended.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS did not indicate specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code, given that the issuance of Schengen visas was rare. Colombians do not need a visa to enter the Schengen area for tourist reasons.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

There were no specific needs identified.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS did not express any concerns about the Art. 24 (2) cascade rules, also because tourist visas are not necessary for Colombians.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

N/A.

3.5 Exchange of information

The resumption of LSC coordination meetings presence strengthened the opportunity to exchange information, including on best practices on how to handle visa applications despite the rare cases. Exchanges also included experiences with requests from Russian and Chinese citizens as well as expectations for the introduction of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A.

4. Challenges

One of the challenges identified in 2022 report was the promotion of the ETIAS system in Colombia and to describe well what its entry into force implies. To this end, the EU Delegation continued to provide relevant information, including in social media etc.

Another challenge identified was the admissibility of applications from Russian citizens (given the war in Ukraine). The EU harmonised policy helped in this regard.

Challenges for the year 2024:

1. The need to explain well to Colombians what the ETIAS system is and how it works.
2. Manage the increased interest in work visas to certain countries (although this is not Schengen).

5. Other issues

N/A.

The report has been approved by LSC members present in Bogota via written procedure.

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UNIÓN EUROPEA
DELEGACIÓN EN COSTA RICA

COOPERACIÓN LOCAL SCHENGEN (CLS) en COSTA RICA
INFORME 2023

1. Introducción

Seis Estados miembros (Alemania, España, Francia, Italia Luxemburgo y Países Bajos) están presentes en Costa Rica y 17 Estados miembros están representados en otros lugares: Colombia (República Checa, Dinamarca); Guatemala (Suecia); México (Bulgaria, Irlanda, Grecia, Chipre, Hungría, Austria, Polonia, Rumania, Eslovaquia, Finlandia); Nueva York (Croacia); Panama (Bélgica, Portugal); Washington (Lituania, Eslovenia). 20 Estados miembros (BE, BG, CZ, DK, EE, FR, EL, IT, CY, LV, HU, MT, AT, PL, PT, RO, SK, FI, SE) tienen cónsules honorarios en Costa Rica; FR e IT fuera de la capital San José.

En Costa Rica, cinco países (DE, ES, IT, NL, CH) emiten visados Schengen. La Embajada de España en Costa Rica es competente para visados Schengen a los siguientes Estados miembros: Estonia, Francia (No Departamentos y Territorios de Ultramar), Grecia, Letonia, Hungría, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Finlandia y Suecia. La Embajada de los Países Bajos es competente para visados Schengen a los siguientes Estados miembros: Bélgica, Luxemburgo y Eslovenia. La Embajada de Suiza es competente para los visados Schengen a los siguientes Estados miembros de la UE: Polonia.

2. Reuniones de la CLS celebradas en 2022

Las estancias de corta duración y el turismo hacia la Unión Europea (DE, ES) procedente de América Latina se ha recuperado con fuerza tras el fuerte impacto de la pandemia. En el año 2023 ya se han recuperado los niveles anteriores al Covid-19.

En Costa Rica no se suelen organizar reuniones de la CLS. Las Embajadas no las ven necesarias, porque hay generalmente muy pocos casos de visados Schengen. Los ciudadanos costarricenses no requieren visado Schengen para viajar a la Unión Europea por periodos inferiores a 90 días. Por ejemplo, en 2023, la Embajada de IT emitió 11 visados Schengen. La Embajada de DE tiene 40 casos de visados Schengen al año, sobre todo de China y de la India para viajes de negocio. La Embajada de NL emite 10-15 visados por año. La Embajada de ES suele tener un poco más casos; en 2023, la mayoría de los visados Schengen fueron emitidos para estancia (127), otros son principalmente visados de múltiples entradas (64).

3. Situación actual

3.1 Aplicación del Código de visados

No hay problemas en Costa Rica por causa del escaso número de visados Schengen que representan en general menos de un 10% de los visados expedidos al año, aunque se puede notar en 2023 un aumento de los visados Schengen expedidos para otras nacionalidades respecto a 2019. Las principales nacionalidades son: República Dominicana, Cuba, Ecuador y China, y en menor medida, India, Rusia y algún otro país árabe o de África subsahariana.

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3.2 Evaluación de la necesidad de armonizar la lista de documentos justificantes

No se considera relevante armonizar ninguna lista de documentos, puesto que para todas las Embajadas se trata de trámites porcentualmente muy reducidos y prácticamente residuales. Todas las Embajadas piden básicamente la misma documentación y no hay ningún atisbo de visa shopping.

3.3 Evaluación de la necesidad de adaptar las normas generales sobre la expedición de visados de entrada múltiple para los solicitantes en virtud del Artículo 24(2) del Código de visados ("cascadas")

Ver el punto 3.2.

3.4 Armonización de las prácticas

No hay iniciativas de este tipo en Costa Rica.

3.5 Intercambio de información

Como hay tan pocos casos de visados Schengen en Costa Rica, no hay intercambios de estadísticas, no hay proveedores externos, etc. En general, no hay problemas con casos de fraude, documentos falsificados, etc.

3.6 Cualquier otra iniciativa tomada en la CLS

Nada.

4. Dificultades

Nada.

5. Varios

Nada.

Todas las Embajadas/Consulados participantes en la Cooperación Local Schengen han aprobado el presente informe.

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION EN REPUBLIQUE DE CÔTE D'IVOIRE

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) en CÔTE D'IVOIRE
RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

Six Etats membres de l'espace Schengen (BE, CH, DE, ES, FR, IT) délivrent des visas et 16 (AT, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HU, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SE, SK) sont représentés par ces derniers en ce qui concerne les visas.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

L'année 2023 a vu une hausse des demandes de visas. Cela a eu un impact sur les délais de rendez-vous et de délivrance, en raison du manque de personnel dans certains consulats, entrainant lui-même du visa shopping vers les autres, avec fraude à la clé (faux certificats d'hébergement…).
Deux réunions de la LSC ont eu lieu en 2023, en mars et en juin, sous la présidence du chef de section politique de la DUE, qui produit les projets de compte-rendu.

3. Etat des lieux

a. Visas en 2023

BE 3464, dont les visas des EM suivants, représentés par BE : NL(398), AT (109), SE (89) et LU (186)
ES 4070, représente aussi PL
IT 6500 (double de 2022)
FR 65900

b. Application du Code des Visas

- Les consulats ont constaté que les demandes s'effectuent toujours à la dernière minute, malgré l'allongement du délai de dépôt.
- Selon les cas, les consulats ou chancelleries diplomatiques qui traitent les demandes de visa sur passeport officiel constatent que leur délivrance par les autorités ivoiriennes est très généreuse (anciens dignitaires, enfants majeurs de détenteurs de passeport diplomatique, descendance des anciens présidents...).
- La fraude documentaire et le visa shopping demeure un problème.
- Les délais d'attente d'un mois sauf pour FR qui a réduit les délais d'attente à une journée pour obtenir un rendez-vous et le délai de délivrance à de moins d'une semaine.
- Coopération avec des prestataires de services externes : VFS (IT, FR, BE – contents) et BLS (ES – pas contents).
- Coordination plus étroite sur les activités en Europe prévues dans le cadre de projets de l'UE; migration légale.

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- La délivrance de visas sur passeport officiel, notamment pour des voyages personnels, continue de poser des difficultés ponctuelles (overstay), en particulier pour des voyageurs possédant en parallèle un visa sur passeport ordinaire.

3.3 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

Même si elle n'est pas formalisée, les EM considèrent que l'harmonisation est déjà réalisée en pratique. S'il y a du « visa shopping », ce n'est pas sur la base des documents demandés mais plutôt de l'encombrement du circuit de dépôt de visa.

3.4 Estimation du besoin d'adapter les règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

Pas de besoin particulier signalé.

3.5 Harmonisation des procédures

Des échanges réguliers ont lieu concernant les modes de vérification des pièces justificatives et les types de fraude constatés. De très légers écarts de tarif entre consulats Schengen existent, mais ils ne paraissent pas problématiques.

3.6 Echange d'informations

L'échange d'informations dans le cadre des réunions LSC inclut en temps normal:
- partage des statistiques;
- cas de fraude;
- coopération avec les autorités locales et les compagnies locales;
- utilisation du VISMail et du Visa Information System;
- offre de formation concernant la fraude documentaire.

4. Défis

L'identification de la fraude documentaire reste un défi d'envergure, nécessitant une mise à jour et un partage constant des informations.

5. Divers

- Adoptions internationales : concernent surtout ES (procédure pour 6 familles en cours), demande de CIV à ce que la famille d'accueil habite avec l'enfant pendant 6 mois ; FR a suspendu les adoptions internationales ; IT pas d'adoption internationale.
- Citoyens européens en prison : Les autorités ne notifient toujours pas les EM de la présence de leurs citoyens en prisons.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO CUBA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in CUBA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 14 Schengen EU Member States present in Cuba (Austria, Belgium, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden) with all of their embassies in Havana. Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania are also invited to the LSC meetings. From non-EU Schengen members, Norway and Switzerland are present as well.
Number of unrepresented Member States have agreements in place with the embassies in Cuba to assist their citizens. Denmark, Finland, Estonia and Iceland are represented by Sweden; Luxembourg is represented by Belgium; Lichtenstein by Switzerland; Malta by Spain.
Croatia, Latvia, Lithania & Slovenia are not represented.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During 2023, five regular meetings of the Local Schengen Coordination group took place (in January, March, June, September and November), chaired by the rotating presidencies of Sweden in first semester of the year and Spain during the second half of the year (in line with the practice of the Local Consular Coordination group). The arrangements were agreed with MS in 2021 due to the personnel limitations of the EU Delegation. In the fall, an EU Consular Correspondent and a back-up Correspondent were officially appointed in the EU Delegation and took over the duties related to Schengen cooperation, to continue working closely with the rotating presidencies, as part of the process to take over the chair of the meetings when conditions allow it. The meetings were held in person at the EU Delegation, with one meeting held at the SE residence. The meetings of the LSC group are open to participation of non-EU Schengen Member States (Norway and Switzerland) and were generally well-attended.
After each meeting, draft minutes were circulated by the presidency, following their joint drafting with the EU Delegation. After being approved by the group, they were shared with the Headquarters in Brussels.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The well-attended Schengen meetings allowed us to ensure the necessary exchange of information and harmonised action when needed.

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During the meetings in 2023, the group discussed various issues, ranging from regular updates on the migratory situation in the country; visa related statistics and the refusal rates; the potential update of the harmonised list of documents for visa applications; the companies providing accepted travel insurances; local MEV cascades according to art. 24 of the Visa code; as well as several practical matters.

Given the local legislation there is no possibility to outsource the handling of visa applications to private companies, hence each embassy has to organize its own logistics "intra muros". This goes not only for the processing of the paper or digital files but also for the further interaction with the visa applicant in person: interview, submitting of original documents + passport, … up to the final return of the passport with the issued Schengen visa.

One major logistic issue that was commonly tackled during 2023 concerned visa appointments services. A permanent solution needed to be found in order to prevent malicious practices whereby through multiple registrations for the same case, no-shows, resale of appointments, etc. and the online or telephone appointment services were unnecessarily overloaded. On top of the specific technical solutions applied by each concerned member state, a shorter registration period limited to 1 month prior to the travel has been installed by most.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

A proposal for an update of the harmonised list, prepared by a working group in the fall of 2022 has been submitted to the Visa Committee in Brussels, but not yet approved. The feedback from the Visa Committee was received in 2023 and is now scheduled for due consideration by the LSC group in 2024.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The assessment to be carried out under Article 24(2b) of the Visa Code has been put on the agenda a couple of times, but has not led up to a conclusive approach.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

N/A

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3.5 Exchange of information

COOPERATION WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES & COMPANIES (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)
Not applicable given the nature of the largely state-run economy.

COOPERATION WITH EXTERNAL SERVICE PROVIDERS AND MONITORING
Impossibility for private companies to develop business in this area.

FRAUD
It is a general appreciation that locally issued documents need to be verified well, because there are many that are not credible. However verification is often complicated due to the absence of cooperation with Cuban institutions (banks). Furthermore, local circumstances (from bureaucratic delays, to shortage of ink) may incite people to forgery, which is common with bank accounts and registry documents.
Visa shopping is a common practice, with applicants searching for embassies with available slots, no matter the destination.
Schengen visa are also often used for other purposes than travelling to Europe because it allows visa free entry to Mexico and other countries in Central America.; the final illegal destination being the US.

STATISTICS
No consolidated statistics have been submitted during 2023.

TRAVEL MEDICAL INSURANCE (TMI)
All member states, except DE, accept TMI from ASSISTUR/ESEN, the Cuban state insurance company.

VIS-MAIL
The local exchange of information on ad hoc files is often done orally. This is possible because of the regular contact between the member states on WhatsApp, and the fact that many colleagues meet in other groups for which they also assume responsibility.
VIS-MAIL can be used when secure transmission is needed.

OTHER ISSUES
EU-nationals have their ESTA for travel to the US cancelled by the American authorities after a visit to Cuba even while only transiting without offboarding in Cuba.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

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4. Challenges

Due to the lack of a previous annual report, we cannot reflect on previously determined challenges. The major challenges for the future will inextricably be linked to the ever-growing migration flows out of Cuba, with possible sudden surges.

5. Other issues

DIRECTIVE 2004-38 FOR FAMILY MEMBERS OF EU CITIZENS
It may be interesting to have a clear statistical view on the volumes of the family reunion visa issued under this Directive**.**

AIRPORT TRANSIT VISA

Only the following 8 Schengen MS require a VTA for Cubans: CZ/DE/ES/FR/NL/PL/PT/CH. They represent the majority of the overall issued visa.
The remaining EU Schengen MS: BE/EL/IT/HU/AT/SK/SE do not have this requirement.
Of these countries only BE & IT have direct flights out of Cuba. The absence of a VTA obligation allowed Cubans to apply for asylum while transiting in the airport in BE.

This final version has been approved by all the Schengen member states present in LSC Havana.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are seven EUMS/SAC diplomatic missions present in the DR: Germany (DE), Spain (ES), France (FR), Italy (IT), the Netherlands (NL), Switzerland (CH), and Austria (AT, only a Consulate). EUMS/SAC not present in the DR may join all Schengen Cooperation Meetings virtually.

In terms of visas:

- NL covers Luxembourg (LU), Belgium (BE), Finland (FI), Norway (NO), Hungary (HU), and Latvia (LVA).
- FR covers Denmark (DK) and Iceland (ISL).
- DE covers Estonia (EE) and Slovakia (SK).
- ES covers Portugal (PT), Greece (GR), Czech Republic (CZ), Lithuania (LT), Sweden (SE), and Malta (MT).
- CH covers Austria (AT), Slovenia (SL), and the Principality of Liechtenstein (FL).

Several EUMS continue outsourcing visa applications, including biometric recording. In an effort to centralise visa processing regionally, some EUMS conduct the processing of visas at their larger missions - for example the US - while the physical aspects of this process (sticker print, shipping, etc.) remain at either the local missions, or outsourced to companies in Santo Domingo.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Meeting coordination continued to be excellent. In 2024, the EUDEL organised 4 LCC/LSC meetings on:

- February 21st
- April 25th
- June 13th
- September 26th

All member states present in the country participated in the meetings. In April, like-minded partners US, Canada and the UK participated to discuss common issues. LSC discussions focused on forged documentation and visa shopping cases, visa processing and waiting-time, and other internal procedures. Last year, the EU Delegation chaired all the above mentioned meetings and reported their outcomes.

3. State of play

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3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EUMS did not report any issues regarding the application of the EU Visa Code, including its last changes [Regulation (EU) 2021/1134 of 07 July 2021].

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EUMS did not report any problems regarding the harmonization of documents.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No problems reported on application of Article 24 in the reporting period.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Based on information received from EUMS/SAC, all practices remain harmonized to the highest possible extent following the Visa Code provisions.

3.5 Exchange of information

Rejection rates in the DR are high, reaching 22% due to migratory risks, lack of sufficient documentation, and lack of verifiable financial means.
Forged documentation continued to be a key issue in 2023. EUMS reported that civil registry documentation improved. However, forged banking statements were common and very difficult to verify. The DEU met with the Bank Supervising Authority (BSA) to discuss possible solutions. In response, the BSA is developing a QR code, as well as verification methods through e-mail. As of February 2024, the BSA started the implementation of a pilot phase, with the support of 3 of the main banks (BHD, Banreservas and Banco Popular). CH, DE, NL, IT and FR will participate. Spain agreed to join as of the second phase, when a system based on bar codes will be introduced.
EUMS continued to report cases of visa shopping, including through travel agencies and visa facilitators. EUMS reported on the existence of a network of visa facilitators - individuals helping with the visa application process - charging up to €7,500. Visa facilitators also help with forging documents, when deemed necessary.
The DR launched a press campaign during the summer of 2022, to obtain a Schengen visa waiver. In 2022, the DEU already informed Dominican authorities on both technical and political aspects of such requests. The President declared the implementation of biometric passports a national security issue.

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As was the case in previous years, EUMS reported long waiting times for visa appointments, ranging from 2 weeks to 5 months. EUMS identified fake appointments from travel agents and visa facilitators as the main cause. As possible solutions, EUMS spoke about the possibilities to charge when bookings are confirmed, block IP addresses from visa facilitators, and prohibit to change the name and passport number after confirming the booking.
In 2023, the DR experienced a lack of passport booklets. This led to the obligation of extending validity by stamps. EUMS reported to accept the method. However, NL informed that in the case of the BENELUX, the extension through stamps would only be accepted until May 2023.
In 2023, the Dominican President decreed that government officials have to travel with their ordinary passport in cases of personal travel. ES, FR, DE, and CH informed that a visa is not required if Dominicans travel on a diplomatic passport.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

In August 2023, 17,000 criminal records were illegally eliminated. The DEU met with the Prosecutor General to discuss its possible repercussions in Schengen visa applications. In response, the Prosecutor General´s Office provided focal points where information can be requested on specific individuals, in case this would be relevant for specific consular transactions.

4. Challenges

For the next annual report, relevant subjects to be addressed are:

- Pilot with Supervising Bank Authority on verification of bank statements.
- Long waiting times visa appointments.
- Implementation of the new biometric passport.
- Dominican requests of Schengen visa waiver.
- Visa shopping and forged documentation.

5. Other issues

No other issues of a specific importance raised by the EUMS/SAC in the reporting period.

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UNIÓN EUROPEA
DELEGACIÓN EN ECUADOR

COOPERACIÓN LOCAL SCHENGEN (CLS) en ECUADOR
INFORME 2023

1. Introducción

Seis Estados miembros del tratado Schengen están presentes (Alemania, España, Francia, Hungría, Italia y Suiza) y catorce son representados en Ecuador por alguno de los países antes citados: Austria (representado por Alemania), Bélgica (representado por Francia), Eslovenia y Polonia (representados por Suiza), Estonia (representado por Italia), República Checa y Eslovaquia (representado por Hungría), Finlandia, Grecia, Lituania, Luxemburgo, Malta, Países Bajos, Portugal (representados por España). Hay Consulados Generales de España en Quito y en Guayaquil. El Consulado General de España en Quito procesa visados de corta estancia para viajar a Grecia, Luxemburgo, Malta y Portugal, para los residentes en todo el Ecuador, y los Consulados Generales de España en Quito y en Guayaquil, para viajar a Países Bajos, Finlandia y Lituania, para los residentes en sus respectivas demarcaciones. La Embajada de Francia en Quito procesa visados de corta estancia para viajar a Bélgica, para los residentes en todo el Ecuador. La Embajada de la República Federal de Alemania en Quito procesa visados de corta estancia para viajar a Alemania y Austria. La Embajada de Alemania tiene la demarcación consular para todo el territorio nacional de Ecuador y las Islas Galápagos. La Sección Consular de la Embajada de Hungría en Quito procesa visados Schengen para viajar, además de Hungría, a la República Checa y Eslovaquia. La Embajada de Suiza representa a Letonia y expide visados de corta duración para Polonia, Eslovenia y Letonia.

2. Reuniones del grupo CLS celebradas en 2023

La actividad de solicitudes de visados marcó un incremento muy substancial durante 2023 y superó los niveles pre-pandemia.

El grupo CLS tuvo cuatro reuniones de cooperación con la Cancillería, que hacen seguimiento a la primera reunión del 27.10.2022 con el objetivo de mejorar los intercambios de información para reducir las tasas de rechazos de los visados Schengen. La Cancillería en estas reuniones amplió el número de instituciones públicas invitadas, incluyendo la Agencia Metropolitana de Control y los Ministerios del Interior y del Turismo. Una campaña de información fue lanzada a raíz de esta cooperación informando a la ciudadanía en los medios digitales sobre los requisitos para presentar una solicitud de visa Schengen y los riesgos de usar los servicios de tramitadoras. Asimismo, la Agencia Metropolitana de Control tuvo varios dispositivos de control y de fiscalización cerca de consulados de estados Schengen para controlar la presencia de agencias tramitadoras.

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Las reuniones de coordinación con la Cancillería tuvieron lugar los días 27.1.2023, 25.4.2023, 28.6.2023 y 7.11.2023.

A petición de algunos Cónsules, una reunión especial con el Cónsul de México en Quito tuvo lugar el 24.5.2023. México reimpuso un régimen de visa a los ciudadanos ecuatorianos que no tengan una visa válida para la zona Schengen, EEUU, Canadá o Japón. EL grupo CLS quiso establecer una cooperación con el Consulado de México ya que ciudadanos ecuatorianos se dirigían a los Consulados Schengen para luego viajar a México y probablemente seguir hasta EEUU. En esta reunión se planteó la posibilidad de intercambios de información entre CLS y México.

3. Situación actual

3.1 Aplicación del Código de visados

El intercambio de información y la coordinación entre los Cónsules en relación con el Código de Visados y su aplicación son satisfactorios.

3.2 Evaluación de la necesidad de armonizar la lista de documentos justificantes

No existe la necesidad de una mayor armonización de la lista de documentos justificantes.

3.3 Adaptación de las normas generales sobre la expedición de visados de entrada múltiple para los solicitantes en virtud del Artículo 24(2) del Código de visados ("cascadas")

Una propuesta de revisión de las normas generales sobre la expedición de visados de entrada múltiple para ciertas categorías de viajes (negocios, culturales, académicos) fue enviada a Bruselas al Comité de visas. Este último hizo unos comentarios que fueron presentados a los consulados locales. La revisión de éstos en el marco del CLS está pendiente. El tema ha quedado recientemente relegado a un segundo plano por la campaña del Ecuador para conseguir la exención de visa Schengen.

3.4 Armonización de las prácticas

En las reuniones de CLS se comparan prácticas sobre distintos asuntos; mencionar la especial coordinación que existe en cuanto a la lucha contra la falsificación de documentos, y el problema de la saturación de citas debido a la alta demanda de visados Schengen después de la pandemia y la presencia de agencias tramitadoras. También el problema de visa shopping entre Estados miembros.

3.5 Intercambio de información

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3.6 Cualquier otra iniciativa tomada en la CLS

Se hizo un proyecto de distribución de países a efectos de asistencia consular. No hay cambios con respeto a 2022.

4. Dificultades

La emisión de visados Schengen durante 2023 superó los niveles pre-pandemia. Eso produjo aumentos de las solicitudes que alcanzaron para algunos consulados los niveles pre-pandemia. Con este aumento, aumentaron también los problemas, como por ejemplo:

- Presentación de documentos falsificados;
- Presencia de tramitadores
- Escasez de citas disponibles
- "Visa shopping"

A raíz de estos problemas, las tasas de rechazos se incrementaron y llegaron al orden de 20-25% del número total de las solicitudes de visas. Frente a estos problemas y en cooperación con la Cancillería un proceso de reuniones entre la CLS y las autoridades se lanzó con la coordinación de la DUE. Estas reuniones pretenden identificar problemas y alimentar el debate sobre las medidas paliatorias necesarias, como por ejemplo campañas de sensibilización, evaluación de las agencias tramitadoras entre otras.

5. Varios

El tema de la exención de visados Schengen para los ciudadanos ecuatorianos es de alta prioridad para Ecuador en las relaciones con la UE; se ha abordado en todos los intercambios de alto nivel y de dialogo político con la UE, y tambien con los EEMM. Con el cambio de gobierno, las expectativas de una exención aumentaron con una posible revisión por parte de la UE de la lista de los países exentos de visas se ha revisado con una posición mucho más prudente y de largo plazo, teniendo en cuenta el aumento de los rechazos de los consulados de la zona Schengen. El tema de la cooperación del grupo CLS-Cancillería se ha planteado en reuniones con la nueva Canciller, Sommerfeld. Ambas partes expresaron su satisfacción con dicho proceso y apoyaron su seguimiento en el trascurso del 2024.

Todas las Embajadas/Consulados participantes en la Cooperación Local Schengen han aprobado el presente informe.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION IN ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in EGYPT
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Twenty-six Member States are present and one (Luxembourg) is represented in Egypt by Belgium. Ten consulates are in Alexandria (AT, BE; DK; DE; FR; EL; IE; IT; MT; PT; SK), three consulates in Hurghada (AT, BE; IT), two consulates in Sharm El Sheikh (BE; IT), two consulates in Luxor (IT; ES), one consulate in Port Said (DK), one consulate in Suez (MT). Among non-EU Schengen countries, Norway and Switzerland have diplomatic representations and issue visas.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Five LSC meetings were held on 20 March, 11 April, 25 May 21 June and 4 September 2023. Four of them were regular meetings with well-attended sessions. EUDEL chaired the meeting usually accompanied by the rotating EU Council Presidency (SE and ES). One Ad hoc meeting was organised on the Commission proposal for a Harmonised List of Supporting Documents. Usually some non-Schengen States attended also some of the LSC meetings (RO BG CY IE). All reports and minutes from the LSC meetings drawn up by EUDEL with greenlight of the rotating presidency. Coordination with the LSC mainly take place in Cairo as most visas are issued there.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS and EUDEL are usually coping with a regular agenda described as follows to ensure the tasks to be carried out in LSC under the Visa Code: External Service Providers (TLS VFS….). "Waiting time for appointments", "refusal rates" "Number of visas issued" at every LSC meeting, Missing documents requested for visa applications and handling (table attached to complete) – Visas fees. Other issues deal with exemptions of fingerprints for biometrics and special cases.

Specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code as discussed in the LSC meetings:
The number of slots/appointments/day for visas requests in Cairo varies much among the consulates, while some embassies do not have slots. The waiting time for issuing a visa once the application filled, is from 2-3 weeks in general to more than two months for some large countries.

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A large number of Schengen states require a pre-payment for visas to limit the "visa shopping" and "no show" of applicants. Several Schengen states experience issues of "no show" that some explain due to the increasing costs linked to the recent devaluation of the EGP pound. Some Schengen States prioritise categories of visa applications – e.g. for business or medical treatment – over tourism visas. Some States foresee a "walk-in" procedure for diplomats or applicants with spouse or kids from the country of destination.
Refusal rates for visa applicants in EGY. These rates approximately vary from less or equal to 15% (FR SI), 20% (EL), 20-30% (AT) 25% DE, (BE) 30% (CZ), 30-40% (PL, CH, PT) 40% (SE) 40-50% (MT) up to 70% (EE).

Issues regarding the documents submitted were raised by several delegations in specific areas in EGY (Assiut area,Cairo, Hurghada, Mars Alam, Fayoum area, Dakhilya and Monufia,Delta area and Gharbeya).

VFS/TLS requested an increase of Visa service fees to some LSC members while others are already at the highest price.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS had heated debates over the period 2022-2023 on the Commission Implementing Decision on the list of supporting documents to be submitted by applicants in Egypt for short stay visas. The Decision was finally adopted and published in spring 2023[6]. The Decision was amended in a meeting on 20 March: salary slips were deleted among the proof of financial means, but the "sufficient financial means" kept as a possibility for proof of accommodation, as mentioned explicitly in the Visa Code.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The "cascade" system is defined as a harmonized approach to the issuing of multiple entry visas with long validity to regular travellers with a positive visa history for a period, which increases gradually from 1 to 5 years. The LSC had a fruitful debate on 14 April that focused on the interpretation regarding the implementing conditions of Article 24-2 of the Visa Code Regulation:

- On the timing of the visas issued: Some states suggested a flexible approach in the case of an applicant with three uniform visas on "the previous two years" with the first one issued before the beginning of the two years period (ex: first visa granted on 10 April 2021 for a period expiring on 9 April 2023).
- Other conditions to issue another visa in the same period: given the local circumstances with some forged or fake documents, or insufficient funds mentioned in bank statements some delegations agreed to refuse issuing new visas even in the case of previous granted visas.

6 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/C-2023-2743_en.PDF
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/C-2023-2743-annex_en.PDF

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- Case of children travelling with their parents on MEV (multiple Entry Visas): some delegations noted the need to issue different visas (ex: business visa for the father, tourist visas for the other family members).

In 2020 shortly after the adoption of the revised Visa Code, a consensus emerged amongst Schengen States in Egypt to maintain the same conditions for the cascade system.
EUDEL reminded LSC that MS' consulates could implement these general rules, taking account of local circumstances and "offer more (or less) generous "cascades" for all or certain categories of the applicants". Such implementation shall be adopted by the European Commission after consultation of the Visa Committee.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Provide information on other initiatives taken to ensure harmonisation of practices.

3.5 Exchange of information

Quarterly statistics; few Schengen states update quarterly on their visa statistics. Most of the statistics are sent annually between 20 December and 5 February. Given the ongoing evacuation of EU nationals, dual nationals and relatives from the Gaza Strip (2600+ evacuated by EUMS between 1 November and 10 January), few Schengen States updated their statistics.

Cases of fraud: many cases of attempted forged, fraught and fake documents are reported by Schengen States: either by an individual (fake data on IDs or different Arabic/EN transliteration of names, fake bank statements, fake employers' payslips)

Travel medical insurance (TMI): a large debate took place on 20 March and 11 April with the Egyptian Pool for Travel Insurance (EPTI) managers representing Egyptian travel insurance companies in Egypt. Egypt Global Assistance –Europe provides certificate translated into English & EU registration details and contact details. An updated version of the sticker for EGA exists. EPTI sent a work flow chart clarifying the process of providing a necessary service for Egyptian citizen in EU countries. EPTI sent a copy (in Arabic) of the EPTI's letter sent to the different Egyptian consulates in EU countries and a revised policy insurance document with latest updates on risks covered for the EGY tourists travelling to the Schengen area.

Cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies):
Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises); 14 Schengen states (CH NO SE PT NL MT HR AT DK FI LV EL HU LT) use VFS, 3 Schengen States use TLS (DE FR BE) 2 Schengen States use BLS (SK ES) 6 Schengen States (PL RO SI EE CZ BG) don't use service providers, 1 IT uses Almaviva. Total 26.
Use of VISMail: the Visa Information System secure system of mail is considered to cumbersome and not user-friendly by some MS (LSC meeting 11 April).

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

None as the last quarter 2023 has been essentially mobilised by the LCC on the evacuation of EU nationals and relatives from the Gaza Strip (2600+ evacuated since 1 Nov).

4. Challenges

Topics to be addressed within the next reporting period (2024): statistics, waiting time for appointments, refusal rates, fake/false/forged documents, relations with service providers.

5. Other issues

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO GEORGIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in GEORGIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

18 Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden) are present in Georgia and 9 Member States (Belgium, Cyprus, Croatia, Finland, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia) are represented from abroad.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

3 LSC meetings took place in 2023, they were well attended and co-chaired by local Consular Presidency and the EU Del. Ad hoc meetings were organised to discuss issues of RU/UA/BY citizens present in Georgia, as well as the issues related to citizens of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Reports were drafted by EU Del and edited by the Consular Presidency. Coordination with LSC outside the capital ensured through emails.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Considering that Citizens of Georgia are not a subject to the Visa Code, the Visa Code Application mainly relay on third country nationals residing in Georgia whereas the implementation of the Articles 6 and 7 of the Visa Code still requires special attention.

Some Member States accept applications from third country nationals who are legally residing in Georgia solely on issued Permanent or Temporary Residence permit by the Georgian Authorities (with some derogations, depending on the Member state). Some MS do not request the Residence Permit, but accept applications from third country nationals based on entry and exit stamp in their passports, assessing that the applicant has been in the country for more than 6 months. The above-mentioned practice is being used like an exception but still when it comes to the Visa Code Paragraph 2 of Article 6 – there is a space for interpretation.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired and MS see no need to amend the existing list that is required in the Visa Code Article 14. Applicants can check this list online and bring all the requested documents to the appointment for the visa application submission.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Article 24 (b) is implemented and MEV is granted to applicant who can show their integrity and reliability, in particular the correct use of previously issued visa.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, several Member States faced a number of applications for short or long-term visas from citizens of the Russian Federation and Belarus. Some Embassies have issued only a few multi Schengen visas to this category of applicants - always based on the instructions of the headquarters.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Not all MS apply the same approach when it comes to Russian and Belarusian citizens.

3.5 Exchange of information

Quarterly statistics are compiled by the EU Del.
No reported irregularities in cooperation with local authorities, companies, or any particular cases of fraud. In summer 2023, several third-country nationals (from an African country), tried to apply for a Schengen visa at the Embassy of France, using fraudulent documents (residence permit, ID, diplomas).

Some Member States report an increase in surrogacy cases, especially in Q3 of 2023.

CZ Embassy reported on an increase of Czech citizens applications for marriage with Russian or Belarusian citizen conducted at the CZ Embassy in Tbilisi. Georgian authorities can also conclude this kind of marriage. This has been a widespread phenomenon to apply for a Schengen visa as a family member of an EU citizen. For some MS such criteria was sufficient to grant the requested visa on the basis of the applicant being a family member of an EU Citizen - whereas for others the Visa Code Article 6 and 7 were followed and applicants were asked to present a valid Residence Permit of Georgia.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

4. Challenges

The issue of the Council Decision of 14 Dec 2022 on the non-acceptance of travel documents of the Russian Federation issued in Ukraine and Georgia, has been brought before the LSC on several occasions.

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Some MS reported on challenges with regard to the confidential nature of the application of this Decision. Embassies do not always have enough expat staff who can assess the documents at the registration phase, in order to decide whether to accept the application.
This Decision has also been mentioned as limiting the scope of travel for those civil society members of ABK and SO who participate in EU supported programs or study visits.

5. Other issues

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO GHANA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in GHANA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Nine (9) EU Member States are present in Ghana (CZ, DE, DK, ES, FR, HU, IT, MT, NL) and 13 are represented by residing MS in Accra (AT, BE, EE, FI, GR, LV, LT, LU, MC, PL, PT, RO, SK). Several EUMS are represented by Honorary Consuls and/or do not have specific agreements with residing MS. Other Schengen partners present in Ghana are Norway and Switzerland.

There are no LSC members outside of Accra, apart from IT and HU honorary consulates in Kumasi. Some members also issue visas in Accra for residents of neighbouring countries (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo among others).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Four LSC meetings were held in 2023, all in physical presence and well-attended by all LSC partners. Meetings were chaired by the EUDEL and hosted respectively by France, Norway/ Netherlands, Hungary and Germany.

At the September 2023 meeting, LSC members agreed to increase the meeting frequency to every two months and for hosting LSC member to serve as co-chair, including determining agenda, suggesting/ inviting guest speaker(s) and drafting minutes. This new practice is broadly welcomed, and has been sustained into 2024.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Members are well-equipped and rapid information exchange is possible through an up-to-date LSC contact list. Most MS use an external service provider (VFS), but those who do not still manage to meet deadlines. There are no significant challenges relating to the implementation of the Visa Code. Some MS operate with longer visa handling times, especially during the summer period (up to three months), although they are actively working towards compliance with the 15-days timeframe.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Harmonised list of supporting documents is in place since 2019. The final LSC meeting in 2023 confirmed a broad interest in updating the list of verified insurance providers, a process that is ongoing with the coordination from CH.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

See section 3.4.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

LSC members all agreed to adopt a **grace period** for visa validity [NB: while the visa validity is extended, the period of stay remains the same]. To be noted that the Visa Code stipulates that insurance certificates do not need to cover the grace period, only length of stay of the applicant.
A majority of LSC members also agreed to comply with the **multiple cascade** procedure of the Visa Code, while applying appropriate measures accounting for the local context (one year at a time). Members also reserve the right to adapt this procedure in exceptional cases that do not fit the general rule [NB: All MS exercise leniency in light of the Covid-19 context, where 2020 and 2021 are not perceived as years with the possibility of easy international travel].

January 2023, LSC members in Ghana proposed a **modification of the visa cascade system** (as stipulated under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code). The proposal implied stricter measures due to the local context (with high levels of document forgery), with a 5-step system with smaller jumps: 1-2-3-4-5.

The Commission presented the LSC proposal to the **Visa Committee** late 2023.In turn, the Committee **suggested to eliminate the final two steps from the proposed five-step cascade,** leading us to a 1-2-3 model instead. LSC members discussed the counter-proposal on 8 February 2024, and the group unanimously agreed with the 3-step proposition regarding the new decision as a general guideline.

3.5 Exchange of information

- *Statistics:* As a standing agenda item, LSC members exchange data on refusal rates, waiting times, etc.
- *Cases of fraud:* Fraudulent documents received include student transcripts, birth certificates, marriage certificates and bank statements. Some MS lack ability to detect fraudulent passports and birth/marriage certificates.
- *Travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI):* A list of credible travel medical insurance companies for Schengen has been compiled by NO in 2017. It is currently being updated, with central coordination by CH.
- *Any problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules:* No problems.
- *Cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies)* is mainly limited to *Birth and Death Registry (BDR)* and *Marriage Registry*. The latter is still paper-based and with very limited resources. Mixed reviews among LSC on cooperation with *BDR*. Good relations and knowledge exchange with *Ghanaian banks* is recommended to ensure veracity of bank statements. Bank statements can be checked via email at almost every bank, although some banks are not always reactive. LSC members usually cross-check with the Ghana Central Bank's official list available publicly on its website.

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Communication and collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Passport Office was particularly challenging in 2022, despite efforts by EURLO and EUDEL to engage the office. However, recent dialogue in 2023 with the Director for Consular Affairs has improved communication channels with the Ministry as a whole.

- *Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises):* Most LSC members use VFS as external service provider, with the exception of DE and HU. Some MS cooperate with law firms to verify documents (DE and CH). Verification fee has to be paid by applicants.
- *Use of VISMail and the Visa Information System*: Not used by all MS, some technical problems. CH, CZ, DE, DK, FR, HU, IT, MT, NL and NO are using VISMail.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Regular **training opportunities** have been organised for the LSC group. A training on fraud and related challenges for visa/consular staff was organised at the Swiss Embassy in June 2023. The NL ILO organised a **meeting on fraud** together with like-minded partners (UK, US, CAN).

Following instructions from EEAS and DG HOME, EUDEL intensified its dialogue with the Ghanaian government on **Article 25a of the Visa Code on returns and readmission**. EUDEL organized a bilateral meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as a large meeting with EUMS, EURLO and Ghanaian stakeholders at high level (MOFARI, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of National Security, Ghana Immigration Service). In the first half of 2023, EUD and EURLO relaunched the Director for Consular Affairs, which has since served as a main contact point at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The frequency of exchange with MOFARI went back down in the second half of 2023, as resulting from a major staff turnover within the Passport office.

LSC members finalised and approved a **Joint EU Consular Crisis Preparedness Framework** (JFW) for Ghana in December 2022. The document establishes a framework for cooperation between EU Member States and the EU Delegation, making cooperation and coordination more efficient and effective in the event of a consular crisis. The plan does not replace the existing national crisis plans, but sets plans for coordinating crisis management. Document received approval by LSC Members, EUD RSO and Consular Correspondents, and EU HQ (EEAS Consular Affairs Committee). The group will prepare another update in 2024.

4. Challenges

Challenges faced in 2023 revolved around:

- **Recent cases of child trafficking** were identified, where guardians were not the biological parents, and identity of the child had been falsified. MS committed to better information sharing on such serious cases.

- **Fraudulent documents** are commonly used in visa applications, resulting in a high refusal rate among LSC members (for some, over 40%). The widespread use of middlemen and lack of reliability of national certifying institutions further exacerbate this issue.

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- **No-shows at visa appointments**: Several MS are experiencing no-shows at visa appointments. This trend is likely a sign that middle-men organisations are booking a large amount of appointments, rather than individual applicants not showing up.

- **Increase in number of visa applications and fully booked appointment slots**: MS are experiencing a continuous high number of visa applications, with some cases of appointments fully booked for the next several months. This has resulted in increasing requests for special appointments.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO HONG KONG & MACAO

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in HONG KONG & MACAO 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

13 Members States of Schengen are present in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong (AT-BE-CZ-DE-ES-FR-HU-IT-FI-NL-PL-SE-CH), with EL having left Hong Kong since the last report. One Member State of Schengen is present in the SAR of Macao (PT). DK and EL are represented in Guangzhou, other MS are in Beijing.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Meetings were held in presence again after the end of the pandemic in the beginning of 2023. All MS present in Hong Kong and CH attended.

The meetings are chaired by the EU Deputy Head of Office. The two MS holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2023 (SE, ES) are present in Hong Kong and co-chaired the meetings.

Reports were drawn up by the EU Office, and sent for approval/comments to the MS. There is no coordination with the MS that are not present in HK and Macao, as this falls outside of the scope of the EU Office.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

While the first months of 2023 were still marked by Covid related travel restrictions (until March 2023), the number of visas issued have, for most MS, in the course of 2023, again reached pre-pandemic levels, including for students and business travellers. Many MS are working on full capacity. MS reported cases of visa shopping.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In general, MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is acquired, but would welcome common practice on the matter of Schengen visas for domestic helpers.

For the locations where work on this <u>has</u> been completed:

N/A

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

This rule is applied.

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3.4 Harmonisation of practices

N/A

3.5 Exchange of information

- Quarterly statistics show that visa delivery has reached its pre-pandemic level since summer 2023 for most MS;
- Cases of fraud remain exceptional, as HK residents do not need a visa to access the Schengen area; MS have raised some issues with visa requests from Philippine nationals;
- MS make use of VISMail and the Visa Information System

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The LSC was held on a bimonthly basis, in particular, to exchange consular information, tips, and good practices.

4. Challenges

MS observed a trend in visa shopping.

Due to the Covid related lockdowns in mainland China, several MS observed an increase in requests for visa from mainland Chinese citizens that were not residents of Hong Kong during 2022 and 2023. Although the normal practise was not to grant them visa, some flexibility was shown in light of the severe travel restrictions and mobility disruptions in mainland China. MS did not observe a trend of Chinese migrants going to EU to settle, as wealthy Chinese would rather obtain an EU passport, and circumvent the visa application.

Regulations on how to deal with visa applications from migrant domestic workers (MDW) accompanying European families to Europe for holidays vary among MS. The issue has raised concerns about compliance with labour laws in Europe. In previous reports it was noted that MS have called for a universal approach to this issue. This challenge remains to be addressed in 2024.

EUO and MS will jointly reach out to Hong Kong authorities and the public in second half of 2024 to prepare for the establishment of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) in 2025.

5. Other issues

Applicants for EL visa are now referred to the Consulate General of Greece in Guangzhou.

HK authorities (Philip TANG, Senior Immigration Officer, International Co-operation Section, Immigration Department, HKSAR Government) have been in touch regarding the development of Entry/Exit Systems (EES) and ETIAS.

EUO and MS have been coordinating to update the local Crisis Plan to be finalised in 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO INDIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in INDIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

25 Member States (MSs) are present and one (LI) is represented in India. The three prospective MSs (BG, CY, RO) are also present in New Delhi. In addition, several MSs have additional consulates processing Schengen visas: eight in Mumbai (BE, DE, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL PL), two in Kolkata (FR, IT), two in Bengaluru (FR, NL), one in Chennai (FR - under the Bureau of France but depending on the Consulate General in Pondicherry -) and one in Goa (PT).

All MSs outsource non-judgemental tasks to an external service provider (ESP). With the exception of ES, EL and SK (as of late 2023), they all use the same ESP.
Several MSs' representations in India have also the jurisdiction to process Schengen visa requests of applicants from neighbouring countries (NP, BT, LK, MV, BD, AF, MY, MM, SG).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Following the travel conditions in relation to Covid-19 lifted in 2022, the huge influx of requests, choking the visa processing capacities of most MS (see below) continued to be compounded by a noticeable increase of first-time visa requests substantiated with fake or forged documents, therefore increasing the average processing time. Visa shopping also remained a phenomenon in 2023, though to a lesser extent than in 2022.

Seven regular LSC meetings were held in 2023, with an average representation of **more than 20 MS and prospective MS**. All were held in person (or as hybrid meetings) in the premises of the EU Delegation. Reports were drafted by EUD.

Airport Liaisons Officers (ALOs - seven posted in Delhi, three in Mumbai, and two abroad – FI and NL) are systematically invited and represented at the LSC meetings. IE was invited on one occasion in mid 2023, to the discussion on issues related to the ESP.

Schengen Officers Exchange Day was organised on 16 March 2023 giving the visa officers (MS nationals) opportunity to visit visa sections of seven volunteer (prospective) MS (AT, CH, FI, NL, NO, RO, SE).

In addition, Several MSs participated in a consular fraud working group seminar organised in June 2023 and EUD and MSs participated to a workshop on document and visas frauds organised in December 2023, both organised by the US Embassy.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

EUD and MSs actively engaged and cooperated on the tasks defined by Article 48 of the Visa Code, mainly during the regular meetings. Several MS continued to face issues with accessing the AGORA platform which impeded the cooperation via the platform. In 2023 the solution was not provided by the EEAS IT Helpdesk.

The discussion on migratory risk does not only take place in the LSC, but also in a Local Migration Group, which met two times last year, in particular to gather information and prepare a EU-India High Level Dialogue on Migration and Mobility.

The main problem related to the implementation of the Visa Code discussed in LSC meetings pertained to on one hand the observation of the visa processing time, and MSs competent for processing visas. The continuous high amount of visa requests following lifting of the travel restrictions in 2022 still continued to put significant pressure on most consulates, and many introduced limits (caps) in the applications. As a consequence, Indians wishing to travel either could not apply for visa to some MSs, or faced waiting time of several weeks or months.

The persisting caps and extended delays for applications for travel to some of the main destination MSs continued to have spill-over effects to other MSs, with Indian travellers trying to find alternate ways to enter Schengen MSs. The application of the rule of MS competent for visa processing - main destination- continued to represent one of the challenges in terms of application of the Visa Code in 2023. Several MSs admitted issuing uniform visas to travellers of good profile (or with previous history of Schengen travel), even if “visa shopping” could be suspected.

An additional challenge was put on the human resources of the MS by the high volume of fake and fraudulent documents submitted as part of visa applications. According to several MS local tour operators, travel agencies and other third parties are mainly responsible for submitting fake documents.

MSs exchanged regularly on the evolution of their situation, and adopted mitigation measures. Several consulates received additional human resources to deal with the backlogs and removing of caps.

The common information sheet reviewed at the end of 2022 following the integration of HR to the Schengen area was ready for publication on MSs’ websites on the first days of 2023.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The revision of the harmonised list of supporting documents in India was adopted in May 2020. In absence of guidelines on monitoring of its implementation, there is still no active monitoring in this respect. The harmonised list contains specific instructions regarding film crews (a specific feature in India considering the strength of the film industry). The need to revise the list was not raised by any of the MS in 2023.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Discussions on the adaptation of the MEV cascades that started in 2022 were held at three LSC meetings in 2023 (January, September, and November). Two adaptations (general one and specific one for seafarers) were agreed and put forward for discussions at the Visa Committee (first one in March, later in October and December).

Despite some reservations of the Visa Committee on the proposal of the general Cascade, the proposal put forward by the LSC was adopted by the Visa Committee and the respective procedure for Commission's implementing decision was launched by DG HOME end 2023.

Regarding the proposal for the Cascade for Seafarers, as it concerns only several EU MS, the Visa Committee did not accept the proposal in order not to create a precedence of creating a cascade for a specific category of travellers, but gave the option for the LSC to make a local agreement of those MS concerned on the implementation of the cascade in a form it was proposed. At the last meeting of 2023, some MS flagged the need to consult their Capitals on such solution, hence the discussion should be finalised in early 2024.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

At the beginning of the year, the LSC group continued to share extensively practices in relation to restrictions to non-essential travels, or resumption of visa processing operations, in a bid to promote harmonisation of MSs' approaches.

The extensive discussions on adaptation of cascade helped also exchanging on the current implementation, with more opportunity for harmonising practices across the consulates.

3.5 Exchange of information

Quarterly statistics:
A uniform template is in place, also including optional features for reporting processing of national visas (having for some a huge impact on the overall visa processing capacity). This section is largely filled also by the MSs when they share their data.

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Despite discussion at LSC meetings and regular reminder of the obligation to report, majority of the 40 visa sections in India reported no quarterly statistics or reported only for one or two quarters. Partially this was also linked with the issues of accessing AGORA. The absence of statistics however prevents from performing any meaningful analysis of trends.

Cases of fraud

As explained above, a steep increase of fraudulent practices linked to visa applications - both Schengen and national visas (students in particular) - were reported by MSs. This was discussed during several LSC meetings as well as during two workshops at the US embassy. The main challenge remains how to address this continuous trend, and in particular the follow-up to be given to individual cases of forged or fake official documents.

Travel medical insurance (TMI):

The system in place in India for verification of TMI (through a website managed by the General Insurance Council (GIC)), allowing verification of authenticity of individual contracts works well. One MS (DK) has volunteered to be the contact point of the GIC for solving issues.

Cooperation with local authorities and companies (banks, employers, transport companies):

Exchange of information and experience on those took place in the LSC meetings but also thanks to the ALOs, who also share their expertise and knowledge on ad-hoc basis, upon request from individual visa sections.

Cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises).

With all MS but three (SK, ES, EL) using the same ESP, there is a lot of opportunity for cooperation, and this has been discussed extensively within the LSC. Upon initiative of CH, CH, AT and LU have started common inspections of the ESP centers that they have in common. A working group on cooperation with VFS (MT, PT, IE, NL, PL) was set up in May. MT, as the lead, prepared a questionnaire to collect information on MS experience with VFS. A set of common issues was identified. The outcomes of the questionnaire were discussed at the LSC meeting in October, however it was concluded that given complexity of the issues and fact that for almost each MS the situation is to some extend different further reflections and subsequent discussions are needed to define whether a common approach is feasible. The issue is to be taken up in 2024 again.

Use of VISMail and the Visa Information System;

This topic was briefly touched upon at one of the meetings but was not discussed in detail in 2023.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

At the LSC meeting in November, a proposal for a study on visa processing was discussed. The study, to be undertaken under the EU-funded programme Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility phase II, could provide an actual picture of visa processing among the Schengen states and help to counterbalance the widely spread narratives within the Indian public about the lack of opportunities for the Indians to work, study and travel in the EU linked to the allegedly defective visa processing.

4. Challenges

Response to the challenges identified in the 2022 report
The working group on VFS operations collected input from 11 MS regarding their experience with the ESP and MS discussed the outcomes of the questionnaire in one of the LSC meetings. Given the complexity of the issue and the fact that there is no uniform way of operating between the MS and the ESP, further reflection will be needed in 2024 on how to address the need for a coordinated approach regarding deficiencies in the quality of service of the main ESP.

Subject to be addressed in the next reporting period:

In addition, the following subjects still need to be addressed:

- Confirmation of the need (or not) to review the list of supporting documents (general, film crews);
- Continue exchange on ways to deal with forged and fake documents, spurious agents and traffickers, sharing information and encouraging legal actions.
- Definition of a dedicated/single federal contact (within the Ministry of Home Affairs or the Indian Police) for the transmission of information regarding fraudulent documents and denunciation of fraud, trafficking in human beings or migrant smuggling
- Discuss the possibility for harmonisation of visa fees
- Finalise the discussion on the local agreement regarding the Cascade for Seafarers

5. Other issues

The issue of Schengen visa processing capacity cannot be treated independently from the capacity of national visa requests. Most MS also face a very significant increase of visa requests both for studies, and for work. In most cases, these are processed by the same teams in the consulates. Although these topics are outside the visa code remit, there is also an interest from MS of sharing experience in such fields.

The report has been approved by the all Member States present.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO INDONESIA AND BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in INDONESIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

22 EU Member States (MS) have an embassy in Jakarta. This includes countries that are not (yet) part of Schengen (CY, IE and BG and RO) at the time of reporting. Schengen countries Norway and Switzerland are represented in Jakarta.

Several embassies issue Schengen visas on behalf of other Schengen countries under bilateral arrangements: Austria for Malta and Slovenia, Denmark for Iceland, Finland for Estonia, Germany for Latvia, Hungary for Lithuania, and the Netherlands for Belgium and Luxemburg. Several Schengen countries use external service providers for collecting applications. Some MS collect visa applications in Bali and/or Surabaya for processing in Jakarta.

Some MS regionalized the processing of Schengen visas: for Sweden and Norway all applications from Indonesia are handled in Bangkok, including visa issuing; all visa decisions for the Netherlands are taken centrally in The Hague.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

There were 7 well attended meetings held in 2023, chaired by the EU delegation (EUDEL). The secretariat was held by the EUDEL. The EUDEL collects input for the agenda with participating countries and sends out the agenda, and drafts the meeting minutes after each meeting which are sent out to member states and to EU Headquarters (EEAS and DG HOME). EUDEL maintained contact with like-minded countries. Some MS also organised networking activities for EU and like-minded countries' colleagues.

MS not present in Jakarta are invited to join LSC meetings via webex link, but technical issues still often disrupt or prevent connections.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Good cooperation was ensured via the LSC meetings and communication with an ad-hoc LSC-Consular WhatsApp group, which was later in the year complemented by a signal group to ensure more secure communications.

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Schengen Member States and the EUDEL worked well together on fulfilling the Visa Code requirements. Besides LSC meetings, Schengen Consuls used the LSC mailing list and WA and signal group to exchange information, questions, answers and experiences on Schengen/Visa related issues.

The high increase of visa applications due to the relaxation of Covid-19 travel restrictions, as well as the initially uneven provision of appointments to apply for touristic visas, created a backlog in the availability of appointments for visa requests and encouraged "visa shopping" practices. Most countries managed to reduce the delay in ensuring a meeting for visas by Q4. Visa-processing time was not an issue of concern.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Overall, Schengen countries consider that harmonisation of practices is sufficient with no need to amend the existing list.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

There was no formal request or initiative to prepare possible proposals for the identification of common MEV to be discussed at LSC meetings.

There is some discrepancy in the consideration of Covid travel restrictions versus visa applications, so some MS apply strictly the cascade where others do account for the Covid period. This results in much more SE visa delivered by some MS.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

There was limited local coordination on the regular adjustment of **exchange rates** for Schengen visas fees as most MS indicate that their capacity to coordinate locally the timing and level of exchange rate adjustments is limited by the instructions they receive from their home administrations. Nonetheless, the EU Delegation circulated the regular adjustments done by the German Embassy based on BCE exchange rates for voluntary alignment. The currently uncoordinated adjustments did not result in major discrepancies as to the visa fees applied in Indonesian Rupiah. In this context, from 2024 onwards, DE will not circulate the regular exchange rate adjustments anymore.

As of 2023, there was no harmonized list of **accredited travel agencies** adopted in terms of the LSC and is not envisaged in 2024 either.

3.5 Exchange of information

Coordination on **travel insurances requirements has continued,** with the EUDEL updating a list of insurance companies compliant with Article 15 of the Visa Code. The list is shared for

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comments/approval to the Schengen countries present in Indonesia. A final list is shared with the members and the concerned insurance companies, to be made available for information to visa applicants in the Schengen Consulates.

The timely collection of ***visa statistics*** to be shared has room for improvement.

One of the key topics discussed at the LSC meetings in 2023 was the **cooperation with external service providers**. Most Schengen missions based in Indonesia cooperate with the outsourcing company VFS Global. In general, the cooperation with the visa application centres operated by VFS Global is smooth, with one case of detected fraudulent behaviour of employees. Some issues were reported on the lack of available appointment slots.

The ***VISMail*** continues to be ***used only marginally*** between a few Schengen Consulates, and is not perceived locally as being user-friendly enough to be developed as a regular communication tool between local partners.

EU Delegation ensured proper communication of information from HQ. During LSC meetings, Schengen Member States and the EU Delegation also engaged in technical discussions on: possibility of liberalisation of visas between Indonesia and the EU; EUDEL also organized one joint meeting with Indonesian (IDN) authorities. During these meetings, a number of points were raised including: visa on arrival processing by IDN side; visa for EU citizens coming with purposes other than tourism; visa for unmarried couples arriving in IDN.

4. Challenges

As mentioned in previous years' report, there is limited staff capacity in the EU Delegation to carry out LSC effectively (one EEAS Official in charge as part of many other duties). Communication from/with HQ and close local cooperation with the Schengen Consuls helps mitigating this challenge.

5. Other issues

Bilateral agreements on visa exemption for diplomatic and service passports are already in place with a majority of EU Member States. In several cases, the implementation of bilateral agreements is on hold pending the inclusion of biometrical data in Indonesian Diplomatic Passports and the refusal of Indonesia to differentiate between diplomatic and service passports, the latter category being granted generously.

Possible visa-free access to the Schengen area for Indonesian citizens remains a topic of interest.

This report was approved by Member States via silent procedure on 27 February 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ISRAEL
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

The Local Schengen Cooperation (LSC) covered by the EU Delegation in Tel Aviv (EUDELTA) applies to the internationally recognised territory of Israel and is performed by the EU Local Consular Correspondent (Political Officer) together with the Schengen MS consuls accredited to Israel. LSC in Tel Aviv does not cover the Palestinian Territories in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, where most of the MS have its own consulates located in East Jerusalem or Ramallah. Some MS (AT, CZ, EE, FI, LT, SK) cover abovementioned areas from their embassies in Tel Aviv. Visas are issued in the Consular Sections of the Schengen MS in their embassies located in Tel Aviv. IS and LU don't have their own embassies/consular sections in Tel Aviv. IS is thus represented by DK and LU is represented by BE. From 1 May 2023 DK represents Norway in Israel (Tel Aviv) in issuing C-visas, as well as residence cases.

Israeli citizens, holders of ordinary passports, are not required to be in possession of a visa when entering the Schengen area for less than 90 days. LSC Tel Aviv therefore essentially covers the cases of non-Israeli citizens who are residents in Israel. Nationals from the occupied Palestinian territories are subjected to visa requirements, but usually apply for visa in the consulates located in East Jerusalem or Ramallah.

2. LSC meetings held in 2021

In 2023 EUDELTA organised 3 LSC meetings in its premises (they were held back-to-back with the LCC meetings) and one joint LCC-LSC meeting on evacuation of the EU citizens from Israel after the Hamas attack on October 7th. Discussion during both meetings focused mainly on best practices regarding visa operations. All LSC meetings were met with a high interest of the Schengen/MS with more than 20 of them being present in each of the meetings. LSC topics were also occasionally discussed on DHoMs level.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS are already applying the rules of the Revised Visa code and revised rules since February 2020. No problems have been reported so far.

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a. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Visa Committee has officially approved the Harmonized List of Supporting Documents for Israel in 2020. The current list of documents remains valid.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS have adapted to the general rules of multiple-entry visas under Article 24 (2). Some MS limited visa operations in first weeks after Hamas attack in October and after the military operation in Gaza started. However, by the end of December all MS consulates resumed their regular visa operations.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Nothing to report.

3.5 Exchange of information

EUDEL and MS keep regular exchange of information. EUDEL remains in contact with Israeli authorities on regular basis, especially with the IL MFA Consular Department, Diplomatic Protocol, Israel's Population and Immigration Authority. EUDEL remains in a regular contact with the MS consuls also via e-mail list and consular WhattsApp group, which is a daily forum to discuss issues concerning visa and other Schengen topics. All MS present in Tel Aviv recognize Travel Medical Insurances (TMIs) issued by local Israeli companies for the purpose of visa applications. The VIS-Mail system is fully used by MS present.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

After October 7th attacks, EUDEL and MS shared their views on the procedures, restrictions and regulations regarding non-essential travels to IL. Special ad-hoc consular VTC was organised during the hostilities between Hamas and IL in October 2023. Problems with travelling of some EU officials accredited to Israel (f.e. EU COPPS officials) and lack of recognition of the EU laissez-passer were among topics discussed by the HoD during his meeting with the director of the MFA Consular Department.

4. Challenges

Some MS indicated that the procedures regarding issuing visas for European spouses of the Palestinians should be clarified from the IL side. Some colleagues raised also issue of "visa shopping", restrictions regarding issuing visa for Russian and Belorussian citizens, as well as to diplomats.

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5. Other issues

No other issues to be reported.

This report has been approved by all Member States present in Israel and cooperating within the LSC in Tel Aviv.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in JORDAN
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

14 Schengen Member States are present in Amman and issue visas (AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, EL, ES, FR, HU, IT, NL, NO, PL, SE). Six Non-resident Schengen countries have their nearest consulates in Cairo (EE, MT, LV, LT, PT, SI), two in Beirut (SK, DK), one in Ankara (FI), and one in London (IS).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Four regular meetings were held in 2023, all of them well attended. EUD was co-chairing the meetings with CZ in the first semester and the ES Presidency in the second semester.

There are fully functioning WhatsApp/Signal groups of EU/Schengen consuls and of all consuls in Amman, with regular exchanges of information.

The Anti-fraud group (EU MS and like-minded) met three times in 2023; organised by the US Embassy in January with bank representatives due to the increase of fake statements, then hosted by the EUD in May with regional CEOs of VFS Global as special guests, and hosted by ES in December with German Federal Police experts and a Dutch immigration expert.

3. State of play

a. Application of the Visa Code

MS are well equipped to apply the Visa Code and share information on different kinds of visa matters. Exceptions from the Visa Code are only applied for royal visits.

b. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonized list of the supporting documents was adopted by the Visa Committee in June 2023. One of the LSC meetings was devoted to the discussion on this topic in order to achieve uniform implementation among MS.

c. Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

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The group plans to discuss in 2024 the possibility of adopting a local cascade for Jordan.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

MS were sharing information on visa applications and checked regularly what VFS in Amman requires.

3.5 Exchange of information

MS received applications by businesspeople for tourist visas, seen as more favourable, and observed the intention to use study visas or national visas to migrate to Europe. Falsified bank statements were also frequently found. Visa shopping occurs as well.

The group regularly discussed experiences with VFS Global as external provider.

Some MS received Yemeni visa requests, often in almost expiring diplomatic passports or accompanied by fake documents. One MS reported Jordanian applicants with Japanese visa on transit via Europe asking for asylum.

The group also discussed Syrian passports issued recently by the Syrian authorities that do not include the holder's signature according to ICAO. The temporary recognition of such passports is on condition of the signature and authorisation by the Syrian immigration office.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Nothing to report.

4. Challenges

- Worsening profile of the applicants, usually young people (16-40 years), single, from poor areas of North Jordan.
- More falsified documents appearing, especially bank statements.
- Some travel agencies offer help for a fee to prepare the paperwork for visa applicants.
- Applicants increasingly present a travel plan prepared by a travel agency in form of a personal letter (why and where he/she wants/need to travel), but usually no idea about the itinerary in case of questioning them.
- Falsifying US and CAN visas as proof of travel history.

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KAZAKHSTAN
2023 ANNUAL REPORT

1. Introduction

22 MS (20 Schengen States and two observers - BG and RO) have embassies, most with consular sections, in Astana (the capital). There are also five consulates (DE, LT, HU, PL and FR) in Almaty, the former capital. The consulates in Almaty and many of the consular sections in Astana often also cover neighbouring countries, primarily Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - which increases the scope of the issues debated in Kazakhstan's LSC meetings.

Most embassies and consulates work with official visa service providers. Some service providers have offices outside of Astana and Almaty to reduce the travel time for applicants who do not live in proximity to the embassies or consulates. Due to the vast distances between towns and cities, most applicants are unable to apply for their visa in close proximity to their residency. The harsh climate conditions during the wintertime create an additional burden to applicants.

The official service providers contracted by MS collect citizens' documents and forward them to the appropriate Consulate. At the moment, the following official visa centers cover MS in Kazakhstan: VFS - covering 16 countries, BLS - 3 countries, and Visametric - 1 country.

Fraud issues are of particular concern to MS, as cases of (1) selling appointment slots, (2) charging citizens for high-priced services on document preparation, (3) promising "guaranteed" long-term visas - have become more frequent in recent years.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During the reporting period, the LSC group in Astana held four regular meetings on the following dates: 22 February 2023, 26 April 2023, 20 October 2023 and 6 December 2023, and one ad-hoc meeting on 19 December 2023 (with the MFA).

The LSC group meetings were very well attended by the representatives of mentioned embassies. All LSC meetings were organized in offline format. During regular meetings MS and EUDEL discussed visa statistics, trends, and certain cases in visa application process.

Reports (summaries) were drawn up by EUDEL, which has also been in charge of reporting and coordinating the follow-up steps when needed.

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In the end of the year one ad-hoc meeting was organized on December 19 – EUDEL invited representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Department of Consular Service) to discuss visa facilitation issues (as part of the dialogue with KAZ on the topic, launched earlier in 2023) and fraud issues.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

In Kazakhstan, the Visa Code is well implemented, in a coordinated and synchronised manner. The Code proved its relevance as a single unified legal instrument, helping to address effectively common problems raised in relation to the Schengen visa application process. In Kazakhstan, VIS has successfully been applied since 14 November 2013.

3.2 Harmonisation of the list of supporting documents

In 2023, the EUDEL again raised the issue of harmonizing the list of required documents. EUDEL carried out an analysis of the existing visa requirements of embassies/consulates and identified several aspects that require further harmonization in accordance with the 2012 Commission Decision and the Visa Code. At the December 6 LSC meeting, EUDEL showed the presentation comparing visa requirements of all MS, and noted that some MS request additionally specific documents.

In particular, the following points were highlighted that require review by embassies:
- excessive requirements for the provision of certain financial documents;
- pension certificates and work record book;
- requirements for submitting pre-paid accommodation and flights;
- different requirements for employment documents;
- other issues related to proof of socio-economic ties with the country of residence.

Most MS are open to return to a harmonised list of required documents.

3.3 Exchange of information

LSC members regularly exchanged views on flights, visa policies and travel regulations. They also regularly discussed changes introduced by the Kazakh Government and influence of the war in Ukraine.

LSC members regularly shared their visa statistics and discussed issues related to visa centres.

Other issues discussed in the group were:
- Risks related to economic conditions, migration and neighbourhood with Russia;
- Low literacy among Kazakh citizens how to fill the documents and services provided by the private agencies on obtaining visa;

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- Wave of applications including in many cases falsified documents coming from Kyrgyzstan, whose real final destination were Latin American countries (e.g. Mexico);
- Fraud cases involving EU citizens who meet Kazakh women on-line and are asked for money, so that the person in question can obtain a visa and visit them in Europe;
- Forgery in travel insurance forms;
- Fake bank statements provided by applicants;
- Ways to improve the verification of various documents provided by applicants.

3.4 Any other initiative taken in LSC

In 2023, most MS were supportive of visa facilitation for Kazakhstan. Basically, MS support visa facilitation regime, despite the fact that the process is quite complicated, and that it may mean financial losses for some of them.

During the meetings, the Kazakhstan side expressed several concrete visa facilitation proposals for discussion by MS. Those were:

- reduction in the cost of the consular fees;
- abolition of visa fees for certain categories of travellers;
- reduction of the time required for processing visa applications;
- issue of multiple-entry visas for longer periods;
- reduction of the number of additional/supporting documents.

MS highlighted that reducing the time to process visa applications depends on practical circumstances that vary from country to country (such as human resources and varying levels of demand from applicants), rather than on provisions in EU regulations.

Kazakhstan promised to continue working on the issues expressed by MS, regarding effective mechanisms of fraud investigation/prevention, i.e. via licensing system, and awareness- raising activities on visa application process.

Note: Already in 2022, some MS highlighted that they are in favour of raising the issue of visa facilitation for Kazakhstan, since they consider that the benefits would outweigh the risks. MS had several discussions on this at HoMs level, with differing views. Some MS concluded that it was a bit too early to raise this issue locally, and that it was better to raise this in Brussels - to have it on the agenda of the visa-working group. Finally, HoMs concluded that the issue should be moved forward, also in view of the increasingly strategic importance of Kazakhstan to the EU. It is striking that today the same status applies to Russian citizens and to Kazakh citizens: a standard visa regime without facilitation.

4. Challenges

Several MS experience lack of human resources, with great amounts of applications on their waiting lists.

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Regarding 2024, it will be important to:

- Follow-up on the topic of visa regime facilitation, repeatedly raised by the Kazakh authorities;
- Finalise harmonisation of the list of required documents for visas;
- Keep pressure on Kazakhstan in regard to improving sources of data verification, launching an anti-fraud media-campaign, introducing a licensing system for private tour agencies, and creating a hotline service for citizens on visa questions.

5. Other issues

Due to the widespread practice of hiring private visa agencies and experts, Kazakhstanis pay large sums for their 'services', and the number of cases of fraud has increased. Companies offer 'guaranteed' visas in a short time for Kazakhstanis. Specialists fill out forms, find time slots and apply for visas for applicants. Another problem is the publication of photos of clients' passports on social networks for marketing purposes, which contain personal data. The Kazakhstan side proposed launching an online information campaign on raising awareness about possible fraud and encouraging people to independently collect documents to apply for a visa. EUDEL commended the one MS's approach to warn the applicants on the websites to trust only reliable agencies. All MS agreed that such a warning should be added on their websites, as well as on VFS, BLS and Visametric web portals.

When discussing this issue, EUDEL and MS raised the question of a possible licensing system for the activities of such visa agencies/experts, as well as introducing a hotline. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that they will discuss these suggestions and give a follow-up accordingly. Also, EUDEL previously noted the importance of immediately notifying the Prosecutor General's Office of cases of fraud as soon as embassies/consulates report it.

MS were suggested to create a 'black list' of the agencies, in cases of fraud. As for today's practice, one MS stated that every fraud case is noted (as instructed by this MS) by VFS, which simply bans tour operators who forge documents.

Some MS shared positive practices of checking documents, as well as posting information on websites, which they offered to share with other MS.

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The report was consulted with and endorsed by all the members of the LSC group in Kazakhstan.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF KENYA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KENYA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 18 Schengen EU member states represented in Kenya (AT, BE, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE and SK) and 2 Schengen non-EU countries (CH, NO). All of the countries have embassies in Nairobi; some offer also consular services outside of Nairobi (e.g. IT has a visa centre in Mombasa) and several have visa hubs and handle visa applications from other countries in the wider region (e.g. CH, DK, ES, FR, HU, SE, NO). Several of the LSC members were not issuing Schengen visas in 2023 (e.g. PT).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

The LSC Group met on monthly basis in 2023. The meeting are conducted in a hybrid format. Most of the countries participated regularly in LSC meetings, which are run back to back with the meetings of the Local Consular Cooperation (LCC) group. The LSC meetings were chaired by EU Delegation – either by Deputy Head of Delegation or the Head of Administration. Minutes were prepared by EU DEL and shared for approval with LSC members for approval under silent procedure.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Member States reported no significant problems in implementation, particularly with respect to Kenyan visa applications. Some LSC members work through external service providers - VFS (AT, CH, DK, FI, IT, NL, NO); TLS (BE, DE); BLS (ES), while others engage directly with visa applicants (CZ, FR, HU). Some cases of problems with external provider were reported (e.g. appointments outside of the booking system) as were issues of incomplete application files. Waiting times ranged from up to 2 months to no waiting time at all. Some cases of visa shopping were reported as were some visa requests where the travel purpose did not match with the actual travel purpose. LSC members are in close contact and share information to ensure smooth implementation of the Visa Code.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonized list of supporting documents for visa applications in Kenya was adopted on 26 June 2023 (C(2023) 4053) with implementation starting immediately thereafter. There were no difficulties in implementation in 2023. EU DEL received requests to discuss re-opening the list of

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TMI companies – discussion would take place in 2024. None of the MS has raised any difficulty with the implementation in 2023. There was no request for amendments to the list.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

There has been no dedicated discussion on local adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code in 2023. LSC members reported compliance – i.e. multiple entry visas according to the cascade rules found in the Visa Code Handbook (8.4.3.1) to those, who fulfil the requirements of Article 24 (2). The matter will be reviewed in 2024.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Nothing to report.

3.5 Exchange of information

The exchange of information within the LSC group worked well. The hybrid nature of LSC meetings facilitated the participation of those who were not able to take part in person. Information also continued to be shared via email and a dedicated WhatsApp group. Visa statistics were shared orally during the LSC meetings, indicating an annual increase in visa applications of up to almost 40 per cent in comparison to 2022 and variable levels of refusal rate of up to 20% with no clear trend across board in comparison to 2022. In 2024, statistics will be collected on quarterly basis and on paper, to allow for better analysis of trends and regular exchange of views. Cooperation with local authorities was generally good, although LSC members would welcome a more frequent engagement in the context of LSC/LCC meetings (regular speakers to be arranged in 2024).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Nothing to report.

4. Challenges

In 2024, LSC will focus on:

a) establishment of a more structured exchange of visa statistics
b) review of periodicity and focus of LSC meetings; burden sharing
c) review of TMI list and assessment of the need for amendments to existing harmonized list of supporting documents
d) assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in REPUBLIC OF KOREA (RoK) 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

25 EU Member States (EU MS) out of 27 are present in the Republic of Korea (RoK). Cyprus covers the RoK from their embassy located in Beijing and Malta from their MFA in Malta.

The agreements of representation in Schengen visa matters[7] were as follows:

- Embassy of Austria represents Malta;
- Embassy of Belgium represents Luxembourg (Embassy opened end 2023);
- Embassy of Sweden deals with the visa requests that are addressed to Denmark, Iceland and Norway, as part of the agreement of cooperation of the Nordic Council;
- Embassy of Switzerland represents Liechtenstein.
- Embassy of Poland represents Estonia.
- Embassy of Slovakia represents Latvia.
- Embassy of Italy represented Slovenia until September 2023.

It's worth to mention the new status of Croatia as a Schengen country from 1 January 2023 and the fact that the Embassy of Slovenia began issuing Schengen visas in October 2023

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

From January to December 2023, five EU/LSC Consular cooperation group meetings were held on 22 February, 26 April, 28 June, 25 September and 6 November 2023.

During this period, at the request of the Swedish Embassy in its capacity of EU Council Presidency in 1H 2023 and of the Spanish Embassy in its capacity of EU Council Presidency in 2H 2023, EUDEL acted as the chair of the group's meetings. All MS agreed to that. The EU Delegation supported as well with logistics, providing a meeting room at the EU Delegation, drafting minutes, etc.

A large majority of EU MS participated in all meetings. Switzerland and Norway also attended the LSC meetings regularly (Iceland and Liechtenstein do not have diplomatic representation in the RoK).

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

[7] This does not necessarily imply the same arrangements for consular matters more widely.

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As no visas are required for RoK citizens travelling to the EU/Schengen area, LSC discussions on the application of the EU Visa Code[8] have been relatively limited and discussed only when problematical cases were brought up by EU MS/Schengen countries.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of supporting documents for the RoK was adopted by Commission Decision on 24 October 2018[9], following discussion and agreement by the LSC. MS embassies in 2023 did not raise a need to update the agreed list. The Delegation was not made aware of significant issues regarding implementation.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No major issues raised by Member States on this issue during the reporting period.
Due to the visa free entry of Koreans, multiple entry visas are rather rare, although some MS (AT, CZ) mentioned they are actively using the C Visas cascade.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No further initiatives taken as the existing state of affairs is considered satisfactory.

3.5 Exchange of information

Meetings of the group were appreciated as a useful platform to exchange information related to consular and visa issues. Exchange of information focused in particular on issues such as unclear immigration procedures. The chair and other Member States regularly debriefed on meetings with RoK authorities on pertinent topics. Discussions also included a general exchange of experience in dealing with Korean authorities such as the lack of official reaction from MoFA if approached by a Note Verbale. Electronic exchanges via e-mail and through a dedicated electronic group chat were also appreciated by the LSC. Consular and LSC Group on the Signal platform proved to be a useful tool for a quick exchange of information. It contributed to effective sharing of information especially in the situation when the Korean authorities informed about changes of its policies only unofficially, late and/or with unclear wording.

- ***quarterly statistics***
  With overall application numbers per MS being most in the two digit or in the lower three-digit range visa numbers were generally not yet reaching pre COVID levels.

[8] See https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/regulation-ec-no-8102009-european-parliament-and-council-13-july-2009_en
[9] See https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/document/download/a7a18412-bf69-480c-81ad-c197cac18c5b_en and https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/document/download/d8965f84-a157-4817-8ee6-a73e8064fa7a_en

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Some MS observed a slight increase (FI), others a significant increase (PL, FR 50%, PT, SK) while others reported a decrease (BE, HR).
The refusal rate is around +/- 10% for most member states, with a few reporting higher (e.g. FR 20%)

Nationals of China, Uzbekistan and Belarus, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mongolia, India were notable groups of foreigners applying for C visa.
HR reported the average visa applicant was a citizen of an Asian country with a university degree and stable employment in Korea, who has visited Europe at least once before, travelling with their family or Korean spouse. Most of the visas were sought for tourism or business (meeting/conference) purposes.
The BE Embassy observed a significant increase in visa applications from Mongolian citizens established in Korea. This intriguing development prompted investigation, revealing that a Mongolian travel agency has been recommending Belgium as main travel destination. They see two main reasons for this recommendation:

1. Faster Processing Times: Compared to other major European embassies, Belgium boasts quicker visa processing, making it an attractive option for Mongolians seeking efficient visa issuance.
2. Central European Hub: Belgium's strategic location within the Schengen Area allows easy access to other popular European destinations like Paris, Rome or Amsterdam.

Most of the applications are solid and adhering to all documentation requirements, which explains a relatively low rejection rate.
Continuing the same trend as last year, many third-country nationals apply for a visa with a very short departure date, urging Embassies to proceed quickly so that their Visa can be issued before their flight date.

- ***cases of fraud;***

visa shopping is rather rare e.g. PL noticed a few cases (not accepted to be lodged) due to a long queue in other consular posts
Due to Koreas rising popularity among international Students and skilled workers, a rise in non-Korean visa applications is noted. Subsequently a wider variety of non-Korean passports and documents are submitted during the visa process. Therefore more time needs to be invested to check the genuine of these documents. There has been a slight rise in numbers of Bangladeshi, Kazakh, Indonesian, Iranian and Afghan applicants. For example, Lithuania reports that they receive a lot of applications from students, who are the residents of Korea, but mostly citizens of Pakistan, Bangladesh, India. The applicants usually have intensions to use Lithuania as an illegal migration route to the other countries of EU and EEA.

- ***travel medical insurance (TMI) (i.e. insurance companies offering adequate TMI);***

Mondassur (french insurance company) sent a request in December offering their products, all MS have been informed in the LSC meeting

- ***any problems linked to the implementation of the TMI rules;***

no problems with TMI

- ***cooperation with local authorities and companies (e.g. banks, employers, transport companies);***

No problems reported

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- ***cooperation with external service providers and monitoring (including initiatives on common monitoring exercises);***
  The Austrian Embassy restarted cooperation with VFS since Oct 2022. Regular inspections are conducted, so far, there transition worked smoothly.
- ***use of VISMail and the Visa Information System;***
  VISMail is used very rarely.
- ***other issues.***
  None

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

From the Korean side, for 2023 it is notable that the RoK authorities temporarily exempted passport holders from several additional MS from the K-ETA requirement from 18 December 2023 after a joint initiative led by the LSC.
Since 1 September 2021 a new online authorisation system, called K-ETA came into force (resembling the US ESTA system and future ETIAS). K-ETA Korea electronic travel authorization www.k-eta.go.kr is mandatory for all foreigners entering the Republic of Korea (RoK) including those from the EU (effective 1 September 2021) with the exception of diplomatic & official passport holders (from 9 January 2023 onwards) after originally from 29 March 2023 only passport holders from very few EU countries (and not 17 others) have been exempted till the end of 2024.

4. Challenges

No challenges to be addressed have been listed in the 2022 report, therefore no response was necessary.
No subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2024) were raised by Member States.

5. Other issues

This report has been cleared with the local LSC EU/Schengen Coordination group.

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EUROPEAN UNION
OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE IN KOSOVO

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KOSOVO
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Year 2023 was marked by the negotiations and final decision regarding the Visa Liberalization for Kosovo. The long awaited proposal to grant visa free travel to Kosovo was approved by the EU co-legislators in April 2023, to enter into force on 1of January 2024. The decision was well received by the Kosovo public, although public debate also raised concerns such as the risk of brain drain irregular migration and disruption to the job market.

This new state of affairs has had a significant impact in the work of the Schengen visa sections and the Local Schengen Coordination.

During the second half of the year, several communication campaigns were launched to inform the Kosovar public of the details of the visa free travel to the EU, their rights and obligations.

Kosovo hosts Diplomatic Missions of 18 Member States of the EU and Schengen Area.

Member States present	Location	Type of mission(s)
Belgium	Pristina	Embassy
Bulgaria	Pristina	Embassy
Czechia	Pristina	Embassy
Germany	Pristina	Embassy
Greece	Pristina	Liaison Office
France	Pristina	Embassy
Croatia	Pristina	Embassy
Italy	Pristina	Embassy
Luxembourg	Pristina	Embassy
Hungary	Pristina	Embassy
Netherlands	Pristina	Embassy
Austria	Pristina	Embassy
Romania	Pristina	Liaison Office
Slovenia	Pristina	Embassy
Slovakia	Pristina	Liaison Office
Finland	Pristina	Embassy
Sweden	Pristina	Embassy
Switzerland	Pristina	Embassy

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Another 10 EU and Schengen Area Member States are accredited in Kosovo, without local representation.

MS accredited from abroad	Location	Type of mission
Denmark	Vienna	Embassy
Estonia	Vienna	Embassy
Ireland	Budapest	Embassy
Latvia	Praha	Embassy
Lithuania	Zagreb	Embassy
Malta	Valletta	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Poland	Skopje	Embassy (consular relations)
Portugal	Budapest	Embassy
Norway	Ankara	Embassy
Iceland	Reykjavik	Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Schengen visas for Kosovo passport holders were issued in 2023 by:

Member State	Location	Visa representation agreements
Czechia	Skopje	
Germany	Pristina	
Greece	Pristina	
Croatia	Pristina	
Italy	Pristina	Estonia
Hungary	Pristina	Malta
Austria	Skopje	
Poland	Skopje, Tirana	
Portugal	Sofia	
Slovenia	Pristina	Latvia
Slovakia	Pristina	
Finland	Pristina	
Sweden	Skopje	
Switzerland	Pristina	France, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Liechtenstein
Norway	Ankara	Denmark and Iceland

Some Schengen Area Member States use external private service providers (VFS Global and TLS Contact) and visas are processed through the Visa Centers in Pristina.

Generally, in Kosovo, there has been high and continuously increasing demand for Schengen visa applications over the last three years, a situation that will dramatically change with the adoption of the decision on Kosovo's visa liberalization.

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2. LSC meetings held in 2023

From January to December 2023, the European Union Office in Kosovo convened two LSC meetings on 7 of July and 13 of September, and one anti-fraud training for consular officers, in two different sessions on 11 of May.
In addition, the EU Office assured regular exchange on LSC related matters and updates from Brussels via a WhatsApp group and by email. The attendance and exchange of information in the LSC meetings have been consistently good and have further improved during the reporting period, as meetings are routinely organized in a mixed format in person/online to facilitate the participation of non-resident embassies.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The LSC has worked for several years to provide support and harmonize the application of the visa code, procedures and conditions for issuing visas in Kosovo.

The rules concerning applications, admissibility, use of the Visa Information System (VIS), examination of the application, background checks, collection of biometric identifiers and other procedures were strictly followed by the States issuing Schengen visas.

The States issuing Schengen visas applied the criteria established by the Visa Code on decision on visa applications. No challenges arising from the application of the Visa Code were reported.
The Member States consular authorities staff ensured full respect for the human dignity and the fundamental rights of the visa applicants, ensuring that no discrimination affected persons on grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

a. Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonisation of the list of supporting documents has been completed in Kosovo in 2012. The harmonised list of documents is being applied, although in some cases, additional documentation may be requested by the consular authorities in order to support a decision on a particular visa application.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The issue has been discussed in several meetings, and the consular authorities have made an effort to harmonize the practices for close family members to address the high number of visa appointments, while for smaller Missions there was an issue of trust, high abuse of the previous visas and therefore high refusal rates. MEV are usually not issued to the first time travellers.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Given the advantage that Kosovo´s official currency is the Euro, the harmonization of visa fees has been adopted by almost all embassies, with few exceptions.

3.5 Exchange of information

Some Member States continued to submit visa–related statistics. While not all of them have been doing it regularly. There is certainly scope to improve the information exchange in this regard both on the timely reception and the dissemination Information is regularly shared via email and Whatsapp group.
The LCC group agreed to continue LCC meetings online, to avoid unnecessary displacements, and allow the participation of non-resident colleagues both in the Local Consular and Schengen groups. The group will meet in person in informal social occasions.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

- Anti fraud training:

To support the work of the consular authorities applying the Visa Code, the LSC carried out an anti-fraud training, with the support of the Embassies of Germany and Switzerland, aimed at improving the awareness of visa officers of the methods employed by organized groups and private individuals to forge some documents in visa applications. During the two sessions, the Airport Liaison Officers of Germany and Switzerland shared information and samples of forged documents, known fraud practices, coordination with the authorities and with other likeminded embassies. The training was well received and contributed to an improved awareness and networking of visa officers from different Embassies.

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- Visa Liberalization communication campaign:

The EU Office planned and implemented a communication campaign that focused not only on the practicalities of the visa liberalization process but more importantly on common unifying values, a milestone on the EU path, freedom of movement and travel, as well as exploring Europe and MS for short stay visits. The participation of the EU MS, through video selfies of celebrities, sports people, politicians and other figures, and featuring of MS cities in the postcards developed for the campaign, demonstrated the Team Europe approach and the very important aspect of close collaboration between all the members of the EU. Youth involvement was also ensured through the engagement of the Young European Ambassadors as active participants in the outreach events throughout Kosovo, also in cooperation with the government of Kosovo.

This campaign was coordinated with the Kosovo authorities, which launched a parallel campaign to inform the public of the implications of the visa liberalization decision, procedures, requirements as well as rights and obligations. The authorities were invited to present their campaign during the LSC meeting on July 2023, and a coordination mechanism was established. The EU Office presented its campaign during the LSC meeting in September.

4. Challenges

In last years during normal visa operations the main challenges and breaches of the Visa Code in Kosovo were related to general high demand and long waiting periods, the admissibility of visa requests (art.19) and the validity of the visas issued (art. 24 par. 2, 3). High prevalence of visa shopping. Several Member States raised the problem of frequent use of false supporting documents for the visa application. Abuses of the visa appointment booking systems, reportedly by travel agencies that then sell the places to the applicants were also reported.

Additionally, some intermediaries, mainly Travel Agencies and most recently parallel Visa Centres, have built business schemes around the visa application process and continuously misinform people.

It is clear that many of the current LSC challenges will be reduced by the introduction of the visa free regime, although this might in turn bring new challenges. The Government has requested the support of the EU Office and the Member States in collecting the necessary information and data to monitor the use of the visa free regime to prevent misuse and establish an early warning system.

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5. Other issues

Koordinaciona Uprava (KU) passports are passports issued by Serbian Coordination Directorate (in Serbian Координациона управа / *Koordinaciona uprava*) to Serbian citizens residing in Kosovo, are accepted by most EU Member States and Schengen participants. Connected to the adoption of the visa free regime for Kosovo, on 16 November 2023, the Commission adopted a proposal to ensure that all citizens of the Western Balkans will be covered by a visa free regime when travelling to the EU. The proposal will allow Kosovo-Serbs, who are holders of Serbian passports issued by the Serbian Coordination Directorate, to travel visa-free to the EU. Once adopted, this proposal will complement the entry into force of the visa free regime for Kosovo passport holders.

This proposal caused controversy. The Kosovo authorities and Kosovo Albanian CSOs reacted strongly against it, while Kosovo Serb minority supported it.

In its public statements, the EU underlined that the objective of the proposal is that all citizens of the Western Balkans can travel visa-free, and that it does not conflict with or undermine the efforts of Kosovo government to ensure access of Kosovo-Serbs to Kosovo passports.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in KYRGYZ REPUBLIC 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

3 EU Member States are present in the capital Bishkek with resident Embassies (DE, FR, HU). Embassy of Switzerland is also present.
4 Schengen Member States are represented by Germany (BE, LUX, PT, NO).
8 Schengen Member States are represented by Switzerland (FR, PL, CZ, SLVN, SK, EE, LV, LIE)
6 Schengen Member States are represented by Hungary (ML, IT, LIT, ES, NL, GR).
FR Embassy in Bishkek does not issue visas. The Consul of FR in Astana covers Kyrgyzstan on LSC issues.
Member States who have agreements with private companies where citizens of Kyrgyzstan can submit applications:
HU VFS Global Bishkek
DE Visametric Bishkek
FIN VFS Global Bishkek
FR VFS Bishkek and in Almaty (Kazakhstan)
GRE VFS Global Bishkek
CRO VFS Global Bishkek
CZ VFS Global Bishkek
LV VFS Global Bishkek
IT VFS Global Bishkek
NO for residence permits Kyrgyzstan citizens/residents can apply at VFS in Almaty, Astana, as well as at any VFS that falls under the NO immigration hub in Ankara
RO visa applications to the Embassy in Astana through the portal www.evisa.mae.ro
DK VFS Global in Almaty
Member States Embassies based abroad and accredited to Kyrgyzstan are as follows:
In Astana, Kazakhstan: BE, NED, LIT, LV, CRO, CZ, SVK, GRE, ES, PL, EE, FIN, IT, RO, BG, AT
In Moscow, RF: SLVN, CYP, PT, IRL (currently no Consul at the Embassy, communication on LSC issues is held with the Ambassador), DK (Consul currently based at MFA in Copenhagen)
In Ankara, Turkiye: SWE
LUX and MT do not have Embassies accredited to Kyrgyzstan, thus for LSC issues they communicate from their capitals.
NO and ISL have accredited Ambassadors based in their capitals. LIE has no accredited Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan and on LSC issues is represented by Switzerland.
Citizens of MS, non-represented in the Kyrgyz Republic can have ETDs or other support from locally present Embassies.

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2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Three LSC meetings took place in the course of 2023 (April, July and October). These meetings were well attended by the MS present in Bishkek and Switzerland, as well as online by a number of MS Embassies accredited to Kyrgyzstan from Astana and from Moscow. The meetings were chaired by the EU Delegation, who also prepared the first draft of the minutes accordingly.

Most of the Consuls (also those based abroad and accredited in Kyrgyzstan) are included in a Signal group. This group has been initially created for Deputy Heads of Mission. Later some of the MS Ambassadors and Consuls also joined. If MS consider it necessary, as separate Signal group for Consuls can be established.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Embassies and EU DEL are prepared to ensure tasks, as required by the Visa Code.
A specific problem is securing legal use of issued visas by Kyrgyz citizens. On numerous occasions visas are used not in destinations initially indicated in the application form. Currently MS are in discussion how to tackle this problem.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

On-going. Partially completed. Due to new circumstances and attempts of presenting false application information some Embassies are forced to request additional documents, for example bank statements for the last 6 months (previously last 3 months). Another challenge is improper behaviour of travel companies, some of which frequently attempt to receive financial gains by "selling" timeslots to applicants, as well as by using other illegal practices.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In 2023 the LSC group decided that there is no need, nor necessary conditions to adapt the general rules.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

In order to ensure exchange and harmonisation, meetings on a regular basis are planned and conducted.

3.5 Exchange of information

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Information regarding i.e. visa fraud, information about external service providers is shared by the MS. There is regular cooperation regarding individual cases. Other information shared is related to medical insurance companies, banks, travel agencies.
Statistics are usually shared on an ad hoc basis.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

4. Challenges

In 2023 the main challenges were related to applicants submitting fake, misleading supporting documents in order to obtain Schengen visa. Also the law enforcement agencies in Kyrgyzstan have for the first time cracked down on an organised crime group who were producing faking Schengen visas.
Local travel companies use fraud simulating they booked timeslot and obtained visas for applicants, with the latter discovering all this only after having paid a significant fee. There are many suspicious advertisements about guaranteed receiving of visas and resident permits/citizenships in MS.
Love fraud is also often used, where MS citizens based abroad are tricked to pay money for nor existing people and expenses.

5. Other issues

Kyrgyzstan illegal immigration to the US by visa fraud, Schengen Visa application in order to travel to Panama, Mexico, Costa Rica or to apply for visa to the US in EU Member States.
According to the information received, some of travel companies help applicants to submit suspicious documents to help illegal immigration, also to USA.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF LEBANON

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in LEBANON
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

In Lebanon seventeen Schengen Member States (hereafter 'MS') are present and issuing Schengen visas: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Finland and Sweden.

Eight MS represent other MS on issuing visas: Belgium (Luxembourg), Spain (Portugal[10]), France (Estonia), Norway (Iceland), Italy (Malta), Hungary (Latvia, Slovenia), Austria (Lithuania) and Switzerland (Liechtenstein).

There are no LSC consular sections in Lebanon outside Beirut.

Some MS deal in Beirut with Schengen visa applications by Syrian nationals residing in Syria.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Five LSC meetings were held in total during 2023. The last meeting was held virtually via WebEx, the other meetings were physical meetings at the EU Delegation (EU DEL).

The meetings were generally well attended. The EU DEL chaired the LSC meetings, while MS submitted input for the agenda. Recurrent topics discussed during the LSC meetings were the issuance of machine readable and biometric passports by the Lebanese authorities, the new Syrian biometric passport, visa statistics, including refusal rates, the harmonized list of supporting documents for short stay visa applications, document fraud, cooperation with Lebanese authorities, and the application of the cascade for visa application.

EU DEL drafted and distributed minutes of the LSC meetings, which MS approved at the following meeting.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

[10] Spain represents Portugal for the Schengen visas of applicants residing in Lebanon.

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The MS are generally well equipped to apply the Visa Code and share information on different kinds of visa matters. The fact that it is technically not possible for some MS to extract visa statistics based on the nationality (Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, others) of the applicant makes it difficult to get a full picture of the visa application trends of the different groups of applicants in Lebanon.

MS exchange information with each other on a regular basis, either during the LSC meetings or via VISMAIL, email and WhatsApp (for non-sensitive information). The EU DEL organises and chairs the LSC meetings according to Article 48 of the Visa Code.

The outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war and at the Israeli-Lebanese border had an impact on the functioning of some MS visa sections, notably in the first month of the war. The reorganisation of some MS consular sections (in order to channel their resources to their nationals' assistance and evacuation plans) and/or the travel advice changes that were introduced, led to a reduction in visa appointments and/or the non-delivery of certain types of visa. Some MS reported a drop in applications in the two weeks following the attack of 7 October, other MS reported an increase in visa applications for family members and other MS express that no changing trends were reported.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS drafted and approved a new harmonised list of supporting documents for short stay visa, which was sent to the DG Home in Brussels in March and discussed in June 2023 at the Visa Committee meeting. The formal procedure for adoption by the College of Commissioners should start in early 2024.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS reported that while being willing to apply the MEV cascades, they have to assess each application individually taking into account the previous visa obtained, the full documentation of the application as well as the economic means and professional situation of the applicants and its connection with the economic situation in Lebanon.

MS reported on the difficulties of applicants to provide proof of financial means. One MS highlights that it never accepts a visa application without bank statements and even with proof of good financial means, the applicants get not more than a six-months MEV for an initial period, after which applying the cascade could be considered. Another MS reports that it received the instruction that if applicants had a long validity visa and have not travelled for the past two years, it should only issue single entry visa and rebuild the cascade. One MS highlighted that 46% of the visa issued in Lebanon are MEV.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Nothing to report.

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3.5 Exchange of information

The meetings have been used as a platform to exchange information on

- types of passports issued by Lebanese and Syrian authorities.
- visa trends and statistics, especially refusal rates. A template to collect numbers from MS' visa sections was circulated and MS agreed to split numbers based on the nationality of the applicant (LB, SY, PS), at least for those whose system allows to extract numbers based on nationality. As this exercise is very time consuming for the consulates, it was suspended after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.
- cases of fraud. MS reported the submission of fake bank statements, falsified health insurance documents, and fake invitation letters.
- application of the cascade for MEV
- cooperation with local authorities, especially regarding the verification of applicant's financial situation.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

EU DEL organised a workshop on document examination for staff of the Schengen visa sections offered by Frontex in Beirut. The workshop received very positive feedback by the participants.

Since MS noticed an increase in the submission of fake bank statements, EUDEL will try to organise a meeting with representatives of Lebanese banks to discuss the issue.

4. Challenges

Adapting to the rapidly changing situation in Lebanon will continue to be a challenge for visa sections in Beirut as well as detecting and countering fraud schemes. While MS are determined to keep the door to the Schengen area open for applicants from Lebanon, the current situation requires a thorough check of the situation of the applicant and the documents submitted.

The current situation in Southern Lebanon and the region is a focus of concern for all MS that needs a close follow-up for, among other reasons, its impact in the MS visa sections and the Visa Code.

5. Other issues

Noting to report.

** The content of this report has been approved by the MS **

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION AUPRES DE LA REPUBLIQUE DE MADAGASCAR
ET DE L'UNION DES COMORES

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) à MADAGASCAR
RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

Trois Etats membres Schengen sont présents (CH, DE, FR).
Sont représentés

- par la France : Allemagne (uniquement pour les ressortissants malgaches), Autriche, Belgique, Espagne, Estonie, Finlande, Grèce, Italie, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovénie, République tchèque (FR représente en outre Islande) ;
- par la Suisse : Hongrie, Liechtenstein, Norvège, Pays-Bas, Pologne, Suède

L'Allemagne délivre les visas de longue durée et certains visas Schengen, et compte reprendre l'intégralité de la délivrance Schengen en direction de l'Allemagne courant 2024.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

Pas de visibilité jusqu'en septembre 2023, une réunion depuis.

3. État des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

Les délais d'attente sont raisonnables. Il n'y a pas de suspicion de « visa-shopping ». Les dépôts de dossier pour les visas délivrés par la France sont assurés par TLS. La Suisse gère en propre les rendez-vous, de même que l'Allemagne.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs.

La liste des documents justificatifs est harmonisée.

3.3 Estimation du besoin d'adapter les règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

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Pour les endroits où une « cascade » spécifique est en vigueur:
Le Consulat général de France suit la règle « cascade » suivante :

- Un visa de circulation d'un an peut être accordé à un demandeur ayant obtenu 3 visas de court séjour au cours des 2 années précédentes, s'il en a fait bon usage ;
- Un visa de circulation de 2 ans peut être accordé à un demandeur ayant obtenu au cours des 2 années précédentes, un visa de circulation d'un an ;
- Un visa de circulation de 4 ans peut être accordé à un demandeur ayant obtenu au cours des 3 années précédentes un visa de circulation de 2 ans.

Il est cependant à noter que pour les publics cibles, le Consulat général de France déroge à la règle de la cascade en attribuant des visas de circulation dès la deuxième demande de visa (cf. rapport Hermelin).

L'Ambassade de Suisse tente d'appliquer le système des cascades de manière systématique. Cependant, elle n'y parvient pas toujours, car dans le contexte de Madagascar, où il existe un risque migratoire, même les entrées antérieures répétées dans l'espace Schengen ne donnent pas toujours suffisamment de garanties pour pouvoir supposer que le voyage de retour à Madagascar est à nouveau considéré comme assuré lors des voyages futurs.

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

Veuillez fournir des informations sur les autres initiatives prises dans le but d'assurer l'harmonisation des procédures.
S.O.

3.5 Echange d'informations

Décrivez comment se déroule l'échange des informations LSC:

- *statistiques trimestrielles; (brève description qualitative des échanges/tendances observées; n'ajoutez pas de tableaux ou d'annexes de statistiques)*

L'extrême concentration du traitement des visas Schengen auprès du Consulat général de France ne paraît pas susciter une forte demande de coordination. Cela va peut-être évoluer si la reprise de la délivrance des visas Schengen par l'Allemagne se confirme (le CG de France a instruit 768 demandes de visa de court séjour au titre de la représentation de l'Allemagne en 2023).

- *cas de fraude*

Surtout des pièces falsifiées et/ou contradictoires (par ex. divergence entre le salaire mentionné sur le bulletin de salaire et le montant figurant sur le compte bancaire). Fichiers d'état civil peu fiables, fraude courante.

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- *assurance médicale de voyage (càd quelles sont les compagnies d'assurances qui offrent une assurance conforme);*

- *quels sont les problèmes liés à la mise en œuvre des règles relatives à l'assurance médicale de voyage;*

Pas de problème signalé concernant les assurances. Les requérants présentent soit une assurance conclue par l'hôte dans le pays de destination, soit par les compagnies d'assurance locales ARO, AXA ou HAVANA.

- *coopération avec les autorités locales et les compagnies locales (pax exemple : banques, employeurs, compagnies de transport);*

Coopération satisfaisante.

- *coopération avec les prestataires de service et contrôle (citez des initiatives de contrôles exécutés en commun ou pour le compte d'autres Etats Membres);*

- *utilisation du VISMail et du Visa Information System;*

Utilisation avec certains partenaires. Par exemple, l'ambassade de Suisse utilise VISMail pour ses échanges avec l'ambassade de Norvège (qu'elle représente).

- *autres.*

3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

Décrivez brièvement de telles initiatives (motivation/objectif et résultats obtenus)

4. Défis

Décrivez le cas échéant les réponses aux défis mentionnés dans le rapport 2022.

Décrivez les points à traiter au cours du prochain exercice (2024).
Souhait d'échanger sur les tendances, les fraudes, des cas particuliers (sportifs, religieux, personnes visitant plusieurs pays, etc...).

5. Divers

Citez d'autres sujets pertinents en rapport avec la LSC.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF MALAYSIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MALAYSIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Fourteen EU Member States in the Schengen Area have diplomatic representations in Malaysia (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden). Many Member States have Honorary Consular representations all across Malaysia. Some Member States are only represented by an Honorary Consul.
From the non-EU Schengen countries, Switzerland and Norway have diplomatic representations in Kuala Lumpur.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

The EU Delegation hosted and chaired seven LSC meetings in 2023, of which all were organised back-to-back with the Local Consular Cooperation meetings. The meetings were generally well attended.
The EU Delegation with inputs from Member States prepares the agendas and reports. The LSC Meeting reports are approved by a silent procedure by the EU MS.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The cooperation between the Member States and the EU Delegation is close and information is shared according to the Visa Code.
Different MS's have different waiting and processing times.

Malaysia has visa free regime with Schengen zone. Therefore the number of Schengen visa applications is relatively low as they mainly come from the citizens of other countries who legally stay long-term in Malaysia. The refusal rates for Schengen Visas in 2023 showed some divergence (in some cases 6, in other: 16%).

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In general, majority of MS are back on track for the implementation of the MEV cascade, with a flexibility based on the situation (bona fide, applications prior to 2020, etc.).

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Member States share information during the LSC meetings to harmonise practices. Such harmonisation entails, for instance, whether to accept e-pass (electronic pass which replaced the physical sticker Employment Pass) as proof of residence in Malaysia and how to work with different local websites that are used to authenticate e-pass. This topic will be further discussed during LSC meetings in 2024.

Coordination is also used to share experiences from the contacts with the Immigration Department (e.g. on the acceptance of temporary/emergency passports or on the need for POC's).

3.5 Exchange of information

Schengen Member States share visa statistics on a yearly basis, which is considered as an adequate frequency. Numbers for visa applications are limited in Malaysia, mainly because Malaysians are exempt from short-stay visa requirements.

Member States share their observations on new documentations issued by Malaysian authorities and discuss any problems they might have faced in the cooperation with local authorities.

During 2023 Member States reported having observed an increase number of fraudulent cases, especially passport and e-pass forging.

VISMail is not used regularly.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The EU Delegation in 2023 hosted the Immigration Department under the Ministry of Home Affairs at a LSC meeting on the 18th of January.

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4. Challenges

Member States sometimes face challenges in receiving consistent and timely information from the Malaysian authorities. The Ministry of Home Affairs and its subordinate Immigration Department have not replied to requests for information.
Access to the regulations in force is problematic, and their application depends largely on the immigration officer in post at the time the check or application is made.

Member States observe some challenges in certifying the place of birth of Malaysian citizens, because Malaysian passports in some cases state the territory or the name of the hospital as a place of birth.

The LSC in Malaysia plans to reissue its invitation to the Immigration Department as a follow up after the meeting in January 2023 and to discuss ways to increase cooperation and to obtain first-hand information from the authorities.

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.

Approved by all Member States present in Malaysia.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO MEXICO

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MEXICO
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

The Delegation of the European Union to Mexico is responsible for the organisation, chairing and follow-up of Local Schengen Cooperation meetings. The LSC group in Mexico consists of 16 Schengen countries that are EU Member States, Bulgaria and Romania (all represented in Mexico-City through an Embassy) as well as Norway and Switzerland. It is worth noting that MS maintain three Consulates General outside the capital Mexico City: ES has a Consulate General in Guadalajara (State of Jalisco) and both ES and FR in Monterrey (State of Nuevo León).

- **Austria** (for Schengen visas also representing Malta)
- **Belgium** (also representing Luxembourg and Slovenia for Schengen visas)
- **Bulgaria** (not applying the common visa policy in full yet, always invited to LSC meetings)
- **Czech Republic**
- **Denmark** (also issuing Schengen visas for Sweden, Norway and Iceland)
- **Finland**
- **France**
- **Germany**
- **Greece**
- **Hungary (**Schengen visas for Hungary are temporarily issued by Spain, due to works in HU Embassy)
- **Italy**
- **Netherlands**
- **Poland**
- **Portugal**
- **Romania** (not applying the common visa policy in full yet, always invited to LSC meetings)
- **Slovakia** (for Schengen visas representing Latvia)
- **Spain** (for Schengen visas representing Estonia and – temporarily due to works at HU Embassy – Hungary)
- **Sweden** (Schengen visas for Sweden are issued by Denmark)
- **Norway** (Schengen visas for Norway are issued by Denmark)
- **Switzerland** (also issuing Schengen visas for Liechtenstein)
- **EU Delegation** (chair)

Since Lithuania has neither a representation arrangement nor consulates in Mexico, applicants for Schengen visas have to apply at the Lithuanian Embassy to the United States of America and to the United Mexican States, based in Washington DC.

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2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In the reporting period, four LSC meetings were held, in March, June, September and December 2023. LSC meetings are usually held back-to-back with LCC meetings.

Coordination of the LSC remained very positive through the exchange of information on the consular WhatsApp group, which continued to be very active and efficient. EUDEL shares the LSC meeting reports with the MS locally.

Outside the capital city, only ES and FR maintain professional consular representations (see above). For this reason, there are no additional regional LSC groups in Mexico.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Due to the EU-Mexico tourist visa waiver agreement (VWA), Mexican nationals are exempted from Schengen visas. Therefore, the number of Schengen visa applications in Mexico (by third country nationals only) is limited. The Member States issued a bit more than 2,000 Schengen visas for 2023 (refusal rate ca. 6%).

As far as the cost of Schengen visas is concerned, MS apply different exchange rates and also update them with different regularity, mostly according to instructions from their capitals. It is therefore impossible to have one uniform visa fee in the local currency. However, the differences in fees for Schengen visas are minimal and do not lead to visa shopping.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of supporting documents was adopted by the LSC in 2019 and its implementation has not encountered any major difficulties so far.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In 2020, the EUDEL had updated participants on Schengen-related information, recalling that the revised Visa Code came into force on 2nd February 2020 and that the revised Handbook became applicable as of 25 March 2020. No discussions took place in 2023 on ensuring a harmonised application of Multiple Entry Visas at the local level to prevent forum shopping.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Not applicable

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3.5 Exchange of information

Continuing on the practice established in 2022, the WhatsApp group consisting of the MS consuls and the main airlines operating flights between Europe and Mexico remained active. This allowed the exchange of information to facilitate the airlines' work in case of discrepancies among Member States in the way they interpret requirements for entering the Schengen area. The chat group served as an important platform to solve issues related to entry into the EU.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

None

4. Challenges

Misinformation with regard to the implications of the ETIAS roll-out is problematic and could affect negatively the perception of the EU in Mexico. EUDEL regularly informed MS about the spread of misinformation about an alleged visa requirement for Mexicans, which most likely stemmed from a website (www.etiasvisa.com) that appears to communicate the official EU position when in fact it does not. The Mexican media also referred to it. EUDEL countered actively the misinformation through a dedicated campaign, i.e. through numerous interviews by the HoD during the last few years. Changes in the roll-out date of ETIAS risk creating further uncertainty but the EUDEL has been active in communicating already on the matter on its social media accounts in order to prevent the spread of disinformation. Non-Schengen EUMS, like Ireland, regularly communicated about the difficulties they face due to Mexicans' consideration of ETIAS as an EU harmonised tool.

5. Other issues

In March and in December, EUDEL informed about US concerns about the misuse of Schengen visas, especially by third country nationals from Central Asia who travel to Latin America with a Schengen visa (and therefore are exempted of LAC visas) and then seek to cross irregularly into the US.

In the December meeting, the EUDEL informed about the future single EU Online Visa application platform, which will be operational in 2028.

Drafted by the EUDEL in Mexico and approved by all resident EU MS Embassies/Consulates in Mexico City.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO MONTENEGRO

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MONTENEGRO
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Currently, 14 EU MS Embassies (AT, CZ, ES, GR, FR, SI, IT, BG, HU, SK, PL, DE, RO, HR), one Consul-General (HR in Kotor's consulate) and seven Honorary Consuls representing 10 EU MS (AT, BG, DK/SE, FI, HU, NL, RO, SI, ES) are present in Montenegro.
The Common Application Centre Podgorica (CAC) continues to function within the structure of the Embassy of Slovenia and provide support to 14 EU MS (AT, BE, DK, EE, ES, FR, LV, LT, LU, HU, NL, PL, SI, SK).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

In 2023, one Local Schengen Group meeting took place in January. The meetings was organised by the EU Delegation (EUD) in a hybrid way and chaired by the EUD Consular Correspondent.
The LSC meeting was well attended, with non-resident EU MS attending the meeting via WebEx. Non-Schengen EU MS observed the meeting. Minutes were prepared by the EUD and distributed to the participants.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

SI: Waiting time for appointment is longer because of the longer waiting time for decision on visa application. Applicants book the appointment in advance and often on appointment date they don't come to apply for visa.

DE: The hurdles to obtain a long-term/mid-term residence permit in Montenegro (f. ex. for real estate owners, digital nomads, etc.) are relatively low. At the same time, particularly Russian applicants (amongst the largest groups of third country residents in Montenegro) are currently facing long waiting periods for an appointment at German representations in Russia and Russia's neighboring countries. Hence, the embassy's territorial competence needs to be examined thoroughly, as Montenegro may be considered a convenient short-term hub for the sole purpose of launching short- and particularly long term visa applications. In addition, the Visa Section suspects that certain third country nationals have regularly founded shell companies or let themselves employ by such on minimum wage basis or have procured real estate for the sole purpose of obtaining a Montenegrin resident permit, while their financial and social life is in fact still to be located in and focused on the respective (third) country of origin. Therefore, the verification of both

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territorial competence as well as sufficient financial means to cover travel costs regularly pose a challenge to the Visa Section.

HR: In the course of our practice with visa applicants we experienced most difficulties with visa shopping.

IT: No specific problems.

PL: We do not cooperate with external providers. Applicants are served as quickly as possible. The problem is that there is only one person staff at the consulate.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

For the locations where work on this <u>has not</u> been completed:
For the locations where work on this <u>has</u> been completed:

SI: Slovenian Embassy has the draft list of supporting documents and would welcome harmonization with other MS Embassies in Podgorica.

DE: As per the Embassy's current state of information, no draft lists have yet been agreed upon. The German embassy would welcome further harmonization of practices regarding the above.

HR: Croatian Embassy is willing to collect and exchange information and statistics on practical implementation with the Embassies of other MS in Montenegro, with the aim of harmonizing the supporting documents and preventing visa shopping.

IT: No work is ongoing.

PL: Probably yes.

GR: GR considers that the harmonization of practices is not already acquired, as no draft lists were agreed.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS' implementation of the Commission Implementing Decision on the specific rules on issuing multiple-entry visas:

SI: Yes, except for Russian citizens.

DE: The majority of applicants hold Montenegrin residence permits with a validity not exceeding one year. Given the requirement that the permit needs to be valid for at least three more months upon expiration of the visa, i. e. returning to Montenegro, the majority of cases do not justify the issuance of a Schengen visa with a validity exceeding nine months.

HR: Croatian Embassy applies the aforementioned cascade system taking into account specific local circumstances as well as circumstances of each particular case. Especially, in cases of doubt that the applicant will not be able to meet the necessary requirements, the Croatian Embassy in Montenegro applies a more restrictive approach in relation to the cascade system.

IT: In principle, yes. On a case-by-case basis, there is gradualism, but it is rare.

GR: In principle yes, but residence permit (boravak) is most of the times considered, on individual basis.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

The need remains for adapting the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades').

DE: The Embassy has no knowledge of further ongoing or concluded initiatives aiming at the harmonization of practices.

HR: The complete list of supporting documents can be consulted on the website of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. The applicants are also informed via e-mail about additional documents if eventually required, or invited for an interview in the Embassy.

IT: The Italian Embassy is not aware of local initiatives aiming at the harmonization of practices. Information-sharing is ongoing in the context of the regular meetings organized by the EU Delegation and in bilateral contacts with the other Embassies that issue visas in Montenegro.

PL: Consultations with consuls from other consular districts.

GR: Bilateral consultations and meetings with other consular offices of Schengen countries in Podgorica.

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3.5 Exchange of information

a. Schengen-Visas delivered/declined in 2023:

SI: 2038 delivered, 76 declined; DE: 501 delivered, 104 declined; HR: 447 delivered, 57 declined; IT: 134 delivered, 19 declined; PL: 155 visas delivered, 4 declined; GR: 247 delivered, 2 declined

b. Refusal rate in %:

SI: refusal rate is 3,7% ; DE: on annual average ca. 17,35 % ; HR: Refusal rate is 12,75% ; IT: refusal rate is 12% ; PL: refusal rate is 2,6% ; GR: refusal rate is 1%

c. Currents dynamics/trends (increase/decrease in category x, applicants of y nationality):

EU MS generally received increased number of applications from Russian, Belarus and Turkish citizens.

SI: After a big increase in the number of Schengen visas in the begging of 2023, in the end of year number were decreasing.

DE: (Schengen) volume increase of 147% by comparison with the previous year 2022 (where Covid-related restrictions had still applied); purpose-ratio (c.a. 70 % tourism, 10 % business, 20 % visitors) remains stable. The increase is also related to the fact that the Visa Section does hardly issue multi-annual visas and applicants frequently re-apply after expiration of their visas.

HR: In the previous time period, an increase in the number of Russian national applicants is observed, with regard to both, work and tourist visa requests.

IT: The situation is stable in the numbers of visas that were requested compared to the previous years, both for Schengen and for national visas; increasing number in Russian visas requesters was confirmed also in 2023.

PL: Mainly Belarusians, Turks, citizens of other countries apply for Schengen visas (mostly tourist visas C01 or visiting family and friends visas C02).

GR: Increase of Russian and Turkish applicants for Schengen visas for tourism.

Regarding the cases of fraud, DE noted that forged or manipulated bank statements have been used to provide proof of habitual residence in Montenegro (for example by inserting account movements with digital tools - i. e. photo-shop, etc. - such as wage payments from Montenegrin employers).

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DE mentioned that the Embassy makes regular use of the VIS Mail application. In the Visa Section's experience, local companies/banks rarely provide valuable insights in the context of Visa related inquiries supposedly due to their data protection regulations. Official requests for information on behalf of local authorities have – depending on the case/respective authority - produced mixed results.

IT: We do not cooperate with external service providers; we cooperate with banks and employers in the sense that visa requesters are asked to provide us also with their bank accounts data and employment contracts. Efforts made in the past to obtain more information from banks, but they were not successful, allegedly for their data protection standards and norms. As far as transport is concerned, we double check reservations that have been made for hotels and travels, paying special attention for requesters that ask visas for the first time. We do use VIS Mail, but also direct communications via email with the other Embassies that issue visas in Montenegro.

PL: Yes, we use VIS, SIS II

GR: GR cooperates with local authorities and companies on a case-by-case basis, to verify documents or profiles.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The Council adopted a decision authorising the European Commission to open negotiations with Montenegro on a revised agreement with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). The new agreement was signed in May 2023 and entered into force on November 1st, allowing Frontex to deploy standing corps officer anywhere in Montenegro, where it may be needed (and not only at borders with the EU, as it is the case now). The aim of the joint mission is to support operational activities from the Montenegrin police, in border control and fighting cross-border crimes including migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, documents fraud, stolen vehicles and boats, and smuggling of drugs, weapons and terrorism.

In December, DG Home sent a letter to the Ambassador of Montenegro to officially open the negotiations of the new agreement and request the appointment of a chief negotiator on MNE side. Mr. Olivier Onidi, **Deputy Director-General of DG HOME and the delegation visited Montenegro** and met with representatives from the Ministry of Interior on 1-2 February to discuss this and other migration-related matters in the context of the Western Balkans Action Plan. Mr Onidi debriefed MS on the results of his meetings with the Montenegrin authorities in a special HoMs meeting on 2 February.

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4. Challenges

The co-operation on the LSC related issues has been well established in Montenegro. The EU MS agreed to meet in the upcoming period to exchange information on the procedure for issuing temporary residence, current status on Montenegro's visa liberalization, and alignment with the EU's visa policy.

5. Other issues

The EU Delegation and the EU MS communicate on consular cooperation issues through a Viber group, which also exchanges information on visa and general consular issues.

***The report that it has been approved by all Member States present in Montenegro.**

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION AUPRES DU ROYAUME DU MAROC

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) AUPRES DU ROYAUME DU MAROC RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

19 Etats membres de l'espace Schengen ont une présence diplomatique/consulaire au Maroc: AT (Rabat), BE (Rabat), CH (Rabat), CZ (Rabat), DE (Rabat), DK (Rabat), EL (Rabat), ES (Agadir, Casablanca, Nador, Rabat, Tanger et Tétouan), FI (Rabat), FR (Agadir, Casablanca, Fès, Marrakech, Rabat et Tanger mais les demandes de visa sont uniquement traitées à Rabat et Casablanca), HR (Rabat), HU (Rabat), IT (Rabat, Casablanca), MT (Rabat, Casablanca), NL (Rabat), NO (Rabat), PL (Rabat), PT (Rabat), SE (Rabat).

BG (Rabat), and RO (Rabat), ainsi que IE (Rabat) participent aussi au réunions de GLS comme observateurs.

Accords de représentation pour les questions de visa :

AT et BE représentent respectivement SK et LU.
FI et CZ reçoivent et traitent également les demandes de visa des ressortissants mauritaniens.
DK représente NO.
FR représente EE.
HU assure l'octroi de visa court séjour de SI.
SE représente IS.

Recours aux prestataires de service extérieurs pour la réception des demandes de visa :

AT, FI, HR, DK/NO, IT NL, PT, NL et SE utilisent les services de VFS Global; DE, BE, FR utilisent les services de TLS Contact ; ES recourt aux services du prestataire BLS.

2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

4 réunions ordinaires ont été organisées pendant la période de référence (en février, mai, septembre et décembre 2023), toutes en présentiel (sauf en décembre où une partie des participants était connectée en ligne pour permettre un échange avec les collègues du Siège qui ont présenté la nouvelle législation concernant la digitalisation du visa Schengen.) La participation aux réunions des Etats membres représentés au Maroc est élevée.

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La coordination des réunions LSC est assurée par la Délégation de l'UE au Maroc. Les rapports des réunions LSC sont établis par la Délégation, avec des contributions des membres du groupe LSC. Ils sont ensuite partagés avec les missions diplomatiques des Etats membres, qui les communiquent à leur capitale.

Les consulats des Etats membres en dehors de Rabat reçoivent les rapports et les conclusions des réunions LSC à travers leur mission diplomatique à Rabat et/ou directement de la Délégation de l'UE.

3. Etat des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des visas

En 2023 les déplacements internationaux vers l'espace Schengen ont repris de façon habituelle après la période Covid. Les demandes de visas ont augmenté très rapidement et, pour certains consulats, ont atteint des niveaux qui dépassent la période pré-COVID. Face à cet afflux de demandes, certains problèmes de capacité ont entraîné de longs retards pour l'obtention des entretiens. Le taux de refus était en légère diminution par rapport à la situation en 2022.

Les missions diplomatiques des Etats membres et la Délégation de l'UE ont activement collaboré dans le cadre de la coopération consulaire au titre de Schengen, en conformité avec les dispositions du Code des visas. Pendant la période de référence, l'activité de coopération a été axée principalement sur l'échange d'informations concernant :

- les problèmes de capacité et les délais de rendez-vous/décisions relatives aux demandes ;
- la relation avec les prestataires de service extérieurs pour la réception des demandes de visa ;
- la délivrance et l'utilisation des visas à entrées multiples ;
- l'analyse du risque en matière d'immigration et de sécurité ;
- les signalements dans le système SIS, d'autres échanges d'informations (signalements/ alertes) entre les consulats concernant les demandeurs de visa, la protection des données personnelles des demandeurs de visa ;
- questions spécifiques sur documents demandés ou façon de procéder pour des cas particuliers, par exemple visites officielles ou enfant voyageant avec un seul parent.

Spécificités locales :

- Le manque de ressources humaines entraîne de longues attentes pour les RDV. Néanmoins, les problèmes de « visa shopping » se sont stabilisés après la normalisation de la situation, notamment en ce qui concerne les visas octroyés par la France. Les articles négatifs dans les media, ainsi que lettres et pétitions adressées à la Délégation ont nettement diminué par rapport à 2022 ;

- Le rôle des intermédiaires utilisés par les demandeurs de visa qui, en plus de problèmes liés à la monopolisation des RDV par remplissage automatique, présente un problème de réputation sérieux. Différents modèles innovants de prévention de remplissage automatique ont été discutés (paiement en deux heures, présence physique du demandeur devant la caméra au moment de la réservation obligatoire, etc.) ;

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- Recrudescence de tentatives de fraudes de la part d'associations -ou pseudo associations- sportives et culturelles, ou encore le problème des parents qui laissent leurs mineurs en Europe (surtout enfants âgés de 15 à 17 ans) ;

- Nouvelle utilisation de visa Schengen – un Etat Membre a signalé la délivrance de visa court terme (90 jours) pour travailleurs circulaires.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs

L'ensemble des consulats des Etats membres au Maroc a mis en œuvre la décision d'exécution C(2019)5432 modifiant la décision d'exécution C(2015)6940 en ce qui concerne le titre et la liste des documents justificatifs devant être produits au Maroc par les demandeurs de visa de court séjour. (La décision d'exécution de 2019 a été adoptée par la Commission européenne suivant une proposition du LSC.)

3.3 Estimation du besoin d'adapter les règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des visas (« cascades MEV »)

Le sujet de l'adaptation éventuelle au niveau local des règles générales a fait l'objet de discussions. En général, les Etats membres sont satisfaits du modèle de cascade prévu par le Code des visas et déclarent suivre l'esprit de la cascade. A ce stade, une adaptation des règles ne paraît pas nécessaire, car la disposition de l'Article 24(2) est globalement respectée.

3.4 Harmonisation des procédures, échanges d'informations

L'échange d'informations entre les membres du LSC se déroule à l'occasion des réunions de coordination et/ou via e-mail/VISmail. Les membres de LSC échangent régulièrement et/ou sur base ad-hoc, en fonction des besoins, sur les statistiques de visas délivrés/refusés, sur les suspicions de fraude et d'utilisation de faux documents et le fonctionnement du système VIS.

L'utilisation du VISmail par les membres du LSC reste sous-optimale. L'importance d'utiliser ce système pour les échanges entre les consulats (plutôt que WhatsApp ou e-mail) a été rappelée à plusieurs reprises lors des réunions de coordination.

Les statistiques sont collectées par la Délégation de façon régulière tous les 3 mois.

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4. Défis

Réponses apportées aux défis mentionnés dans le rapport 2022

La mise en œuvre du Code des visas révisé : continuation des discussions sur l'harmonisation au niveau local des procédures de délivrance des visas à entrées multiples.

Systématisation de l'échange des statistiques récentes (Art. 48 Code de visas) – statistiques collectées systématiquement.

Echange d'informations et d'expériences et recherche de solutions, afin d'améliorer les systèmes de prise de rendez-vous et éviter au maximum les abus des intermédiaires.

Points à traiter au cours du prochain exercice (2024)

Continuer à échanger/améliorer les outils réduire les aspects négatifs liés aux des actions des intermédiaires.

Pour des voyages pour raison familiale, un Etat membre a demandé un ajout dans la liste harmonisée d'un document prouvant le lien de parenté – point à discuter prochainement.

5. Divers

Ce rapport a été approuvé par tous les États membres présents au Maroc.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF MOZAMBIQUE

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MOZAMBIQUE
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Of the 11 EU resident Member States Embassies in Maputo, seven: **DE, ES, FR, IT, NL, PT, FI** are issuing Schengen visas for a total of 21 Schengen MS. PT has two General Consulates, in Maputo and in Beira, both issuing Schengen Visas. The PT Consul in Beira is also invited to the meetings of the LCC/LSC and attends virtually.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Exceptionally, because of staff shortages at the EUD, only one meeting was organized in 2023 on 29 June 2023. LSC coordination and exchange of information was ensured by electronic exchanges by e-mail and whatsapp group.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The EU Delegation is chairing the LSC since June 2012, working closely with MS and with the full support and cooperation from the European Commission (DG Home). The EU Delegation writes the reports of the meetings and circulate it for comments and approval to the MS. The LSC fosters exchange of information, coordination and cooperation in carrying-out the tasks foreseen in the Visa Code, including harmonised application of the Visa Code provisions and implementation of the Visa Information System (VIS).

The revised rules in application since 2nd of February 2020 are overall welcomed by MS as perceived as a big simplification. No particular problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code and its revised rules have been reported.

The issue of detection of forged/fake documents from banks and insurances remains a problem.

On the sharing of statistics, it was questioned why VIS-mail cannot do it automatically and if so then the sharing of statistics locally is redundant.

A number of MS noticed an increase in visa requests, now that all constrains of the global pandemic have been lifted.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The Mozambique LSC harmonised list of documents supporting visa application was adopted by the Commission Implementing Decision of 4/9/2014, and in 15 September 2014 all MS started applying it, as joint agreed starting date. Harmonisation of practice is thus acquired. During the reporting period no amendments were deemed necessary by the LSC.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No issue has been reported.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No particular additional measure of harmonisation of practices is being taken in addition to what is in place.

3.5 Exchange of information

As in the past, exchange of information is encouraged in the LSC, namely on: (i) visa statistics trends, based not only on the yearly official statistics as well as quarterly when possible; (ii) the trends regarding the few instances of migratory risk or visa fraud were discussed in the meeting; (iii) overview of the general VIS functioning; (iv) best practices and relevant experiences. As regards the VISMAIL use, all consulates are using it since 20 January 2020 for exchanging personal data of visas applicants, even if for some cases this is managed by Capitals (NL).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

In October 2023, DE kindly offered a workshop by an agent of its federal police expert based in Pretoria on fraud and falsification. All attendants found it very useful and are using tips in their daily work. Although very technical, it was highly appreciated.

LSC meetings and Consular meetings continue to be held together to avoid extra-burden of meetings.

4. Challenges

2024 will be electoral year in Mozambique, with general elections in October, which will dominate the agenda and might turn difficult availability of authorities.

5. Other issues

This report was endorsed by LSC MS.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO MYANMAR

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in MYANMAR
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

9 Member States (MS) have resident embassies/official (non-honorary) representations in Myanmar (Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden). Norway and Switzerland also have resident diplomatic missions in Yangon.
4 MS - France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands - issue Schengen visas in Myanmar. For visa purposes, apart from their own countries:

- **FR** represents CH, CZ, ES, LV and PT
- **DE** represents AT, BE, DK, FI, EL, HU, LU and IS
- **IT** represents MT and SI

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Two LSC meetings took place in the reporting period, i.e. on February 22 and November 30. The EU Delegation organized and chaired both meetings, and prepared and shared the minutes. Meetings were well attended, including online participation of several non-resident missions, most based in Thailand. No other *ad hoc* meetings took place.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Embassies and the EU Delegation are prepared to ensure tasks required by the Visa Code. MS did not highlight any problems related to its implementation.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting document

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired. They did not highlight any further need in this regard.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS have adapted to the general rules for issuing MEV.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Practices related to the application of the EU sanctions regime requirements (103 Myanmar individuals currently listed) and exceptional granting of Schengen visa for sanctioned individuals –

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for example to attend hearings of the International Court of Justice – is a specific topic of interest in the case of Myanmar.

3.5 Exchange of information

Monthly statistics for Schengen applications range between 100 and 200 Schengen visas per emitting resident mission. A high number of applications relate to seafarers, for whom visas are normally issued.

During the reporting period, refusal rates ranged anywhere between 10% and 40%, a marked increase from the around 5% refusal rate pre-coup and pre-COVID. This is representative of the increase in citizens, especially young people, wanting to leave the country. Non-resident missions who issue visas for Myanmar nationals –mainly Bangkok-based– report very few applications, but higher refusal rates.

There is no closed list of insurance providers. The national Myanmar Insurance is *not* accepted as it excludes repatriation, which is a requirement under the Visa Code.
Several MS report a growing issue of fraudulent documents. This includes fraud concerning bank statements, housing documents and reports of illicitly legalized documents – where the applicant was never in possession of the original. This raises questions as to whether authorities in Myanmar correctly notarize documents. Document verification is highly complicated and only some missions use external legal services to this purpose.

Two MS cooperate with external service providers (both use VFS). They do not report issues.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

None.

4. Challenges

The political and security situation remains highly volatile in the country and continues to require a sustained exchange of information, though this affects the LCC group more than the LSC.

5. Other issues

No other issues of importance raised during the 2023 LSC meetings.

MS validated this report in January 2024

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UNIÓN EUROPEA
DELEGACIÓN EN EL PERU

COOPERACIÓN LOCAL SCHENGEN (CLS) en PERU
INFORME 2023

1. Introducción

Hay 14 Estados Miembros representados en Lima a nivel de Embajada y 26 Estados miembros presentes en Perú a nivel consular o de cónsul honorario representados en la capital y en otras ciudades del país (Cuzco, Arequipa, Callao, Iquitos, Bagua, Chiclayo, Ica, Piura, Puerto Maldonado, Trujillo, Tacna).

Algunos Estados Miembros tienen acuerdos de cooperación ad hoc que permiten a un Estado Miembro expedir visados en nombre de otro:

- Alemania representa a Lituania.
- Austria representa a Malta y Eslovenia.
- Bélgica representa a Luxemburgo.
- España representa a Eslovaquia.
- Finlandia representa a: Dinamarca, Estonia, Islandia, Noruega, Suecia.
- Grecia representa a Chipre.

Perú emite pasaportes biométricos desde el 25 de febrero de 2016 y terminó de producir los pasaportes convencionales / no-biométricos el 31 de julio de 2016. Estos seguirán vigentes hasta su vencimiento, permitiendo ingresar al Espacio Schengen.

2. Reuniones de la CLS celebradas en 2023

Con la entrada en vigor del Acuerdo sobre supresión recíproca del requisito de visados de corta duración entre la UE-Perú en marzo de 2016, los Jefes de Misión UE han decidido suprimir las reuniones específicas de la CLS a partir del segundo semestre de 2016 y tratar los temas Schengen como punto en la agenda de las Reuniones del Grupo Consular de la UE, si/y cuando hubiera necesidad. Aunque los peruanos no necesitan más visado para entrar al espacio Schengen, hay extranjeros quienes viven en Perú que necesitan todavía visa Schengen.

Durante el año 2023 hubo 3 reuniones consulares, dos de ellas bajo la presidencia rotativa de la UE (Espana) con el apoyo de la Delegación de la UE en Perú y donde siempre se mantiene la posibilidad de discutir los temas Schengen, si fuese necesario. La participación en las reuniones consulares es muy buena, contando con alrededor de 80% de los 14 Estados Miembros presentes en Perú. La DEL de la UE ha elaborado los informes de las reuniones. El Grupo intercambia información a través de reuniones VTC, por correo electrónico y sobre todo vía el grupo WhatsApp. En 2023 no se han llevado a cabo reuniones CLS fuera de Lima. A excepción de la UE, ningún otro país participa en las reuniones.

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El 2023 no se ha destacado en cuanto a los visados C por personas extranjeras que residen en Perú, sino algunos casos de bolivianos y ecuatorianos. También hubo puntualmente solicitudes de parte de ciudadanos chinos, indios, turcos y rusos.

3. Situación actual

3.1 Aplicación del Código de visados

La mayoría de los EM evalúan la "unificación" de su trabajo bajo el Código VISA como algo avanzado, aunque hay algunos elementos que todavía requieren un ajuste fino:
- uso completo y comúnmente aplicado del formulario de solicitud de visado de conformidad con el Código de visados modificado;
- discrepancias en los requisitos de presencia física al volver a solicitar una visa cuando ya se otorgó una anterior (y más específicamente en lo que respecta a la toma de huellas dactilares);
- discrepancias en el requisito de tener determinados documentos traducidos del español al idioma oficial del país de destino.

Problemas específicos relacionados con la implementación del Código de Visas, centrándose en las reglas revisadas aplicables desde febrero de 2020:
Debido a otras necesidades consulares, no se ha llevado a cabo una discusión dedicada sobre este punto en particular. Sin embargo, los Estados Miembros informaron que implementaron el requisito de que cada sección de visas debe introducir medidas organizativas para que las quejas de visas se presenten, documenten y tramiten de la forma requerida por el Código de Visas.

3.2 Evaluación de la necesidad de armonizar la lista de documentos justificantes

Los Estados Miembros presentes consideran que ya se ha producido la armonización de las practicas.

3.3 Evaluación de la necesidad de adaptar las normas generales sobre la expedición de visados de entrada múltiple para los solicitantes en virtud del Artículo 24(2) del Código de visados (“cascadas”)

En Perú hubo muy pocos casos de expedición de visados de entrada múltiple.

3.4 Armonización de las prácticas

En los últimos años se observaron casos individuales de aplicaciones destinadas a eludir las regulaciones vigentes en algunos países. Todos los EM ven el valor agregado de mantenerse mutuamente informados acerca de los riesgos de visa shopping, especialmente debido a las diferentes regulaciones sobre el procesamiento de solicitudes durante el momento específico de la pandemia.

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3.5 Intercambio de información

En 2023, el uso regular del grupo WhatsApp ha hecho que el intercambio de informaciones y la coordinación entre los Cónsules se han mantenida muy ágil, adaptada a la situación. El grupo se concentró más bien en intercambios de información sobre posible paralizaciones e incidentes que podrían causar dificultades a los turistas europeos. Otro tema de interés fue centrado en los obstáculos que ponen las autoridades peruanas en la cooperación en casos consulares particulares.

Las estadísticas no se compilaron regularmente durante el año y tampoco se dedicó una discusión profunda a este tema. Es probable que en 2024 se lleve a cabo más trabajo sobre estadísticas si los EM lo requieren.

No se informó de casos de fraude a la DEL de la UE ni se llevaron a un foro amplio de LSC.

4. Dificultades

Descríbanse las respuestas a las dificultades, de haberlas, que figuran en el informe de 2023.

- A lo largo del año, el Grupo mantiene a sus miembros al tanto en cuanto a las regulaciones con respecto a los viajes y tránsitos UE-Perú.

Descríbanse los temas por tratar durante el próximo período de referencia (2024).

Con la entrada en vigor del ETIAS (European Travel Information and Authorisation System), habrá que poner un cuidado particular sobre difundir información sobre el nuevo sistema para ingresar al espacio Schengen en las páginas web de los Consulados y Embajadas, compartiendo informaciones con las autoridades peruanas (Cancillería, Superintendencia de Migraciones).

5. Varios

Todas las Embajadas / Consulados comprendidos en la Cooperación Local Schengen han aprobado el presente Informe.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE PHILIPPINES

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in THE PHILIPPINES
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

16 Schengen Member States are present and another 8 are represented from abroad. SI is in the process of setting up a Consulate-General.

The current representation arrangements on visa matters are as follows:

- BE represents Luxembourg and Slovenia.
- CZ represents Slovakia.
- DK represents Estonia.
- EL represents Portugal.
- NL represents Latvia.
- NO represents Iceland from Bangkok.
- AT represents Lithuania.
- MT accredited via Beijing (visas are issued at the Embassy of Malta in Beijing)

2. LSC meetings held in 2022

There were three meetings in 2023: 30 May, 20 September and 4 December.

Meetings are chaired by the EUDEL and are in general well attended. The meetings were held in a hybrid fashion (via Webex and at EU premises). This allowed non-represented or present States to join the meetings. Reports are drafted by the EUDEL and circulated to the LSC.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Member States discussed the trends in visa numbers during each meeting in 2023. The group also discussed the problems encountered with visa shopping. Member States shared their practices in a variety of areas (average waiting time for visa appointments, average duration of validity of a visa, whether to issue single-entry of MEV visas) in order to assess whether this could lead to visa shopping.

The Schengen Visa Code is followed by all Schengen Members States in the Philippines.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EUDEL consulted the group on the need to establish a list of travel documents issued by the Philippines, as suggested by the Handbook for Local Schengen Cooperation. The group did not consider the establishment of such a list to be necessary, given that every country does this for themselves anyway and has separate rules about this.

The list issued by the European Commission in 2021 was not discussed, as it was considered in 2022 that the list worked well.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The Delegation is in the process of undertaking a mapping of Member State practices in issuing MEV and is assessing the interest among Member States to adapt the general rule on issuing MEV to avoid visa shopping among Member States, especially as regards tourist and business visas. Based on the information received so far, it seems that practices are not aligned (whether it is in the length of the validity of the visa or whether to first provide a single-entry visa).

Some Member States have shown interest in a local adaptation of the rules, though discussions are ongoing to see whether a consensus can be found among Member States.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

The LSC discussed the harmonisation of the exchange rate for visa fees. It was agreed that EUDEL would share a harmonised exchange rate in the beginning of each month.

EUDEL consulted the group on the possibility of drafting a common information sheet containing all relevant information to the public, as suggested in the Handbook for Local Schengen Cooperation. The group indicated that there is no need to establish entirely uniform information in view of the differing practices and visa fees for each Member State

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3.5 Exchange of information

In 2023, DK on behalf on the LSC (Rotating task among MS) scrutinised the fulfilment of the requirements of the travel medical insurance (TMI) companies who had approached the LSC in 2023. In December 2023, the LSC agreed to publish the names of those TMI companies which standard policies as presented seemed compliant with the Schengen Codex on the EUDEL homepage.

Several discussions were also held on cases of fraud and forged documents, as well as on specific population groups or locations which had proven to be hotspots of fraud.

The LSC also discussed the acceptance of affidavits of guarantees by people based in EU Member States.

Statistics on the Schengen visas were shared on a quarterly basis.

4. Challenges

The different resources (backlog) but also the practices executed by Schengen Member States for granting Schengen visas, even if done within the flexibility granted by the Visa Code, leads to a certain extent to visa shopping. Harmonisation of practices (for example on MEV visa) could potentially reduce this problem though embassies within the Philippines are often limited by the requirements prescribed by their headquarters.

Filipino citizens with official or diplomatic passports are still obliged to get visas for Belgium and the Netherlands, which is a cause of diplomatic difficulties.

5. Other issues

N/A

This report has been approved by the Schengen Coordination Group of Member States present in the Philippines.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE STATE OF QATAR

الاتحاد الأوروبي
بعثة الاتحاد الأوروبي لدى دولة قطر

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in QATAR
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

A total of 17 Schengen Member States[11] (MS) are represented in Qatar, as well as Bulgaria and Romania, which were recently granted partial accession. All Schengen member states are making use of an external service provider (ESP) to collect and process visa applications including AT, BE, CZ, FI, FR, DE, EL, HR, HU, IT, MT, NL, PL, PT, ES, SE, CH. Two ESP companies operate on behalf of Schengen states in Doha, namely VSF and BLS.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC group met at least once every semester. The meetings were chaired by the EUDEL. LSC meetings are open to all EUMS as observers.
Meetings were always well attended with usually 15-16 MS present; none of the MS were regularly absent.
LSC continued to hold its meetings back-to-back with Consular Cooperation meetings, chaired by the rotating European Council presidency.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

On the 2/2/2020 the LSC MS introduced, in practice, the new Visa Code. Nevertheless, the LSC MS had agreed that the new Visa Code is unnecessarily restrictive to Qatari nationals and contrary to its initial purpose, it adds administrative burden on Consulates. Therefore, they had proposed the exclusion of Qatari nations from the new Visa Code cascade (see relevant section below).

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Even though there is an understanding amongst member states on a rather unified list of documents to be submitted with the visa application, a formal decision is lacking. This is an area where the MS could work on, following also the establishment of the EU Delegation in Qatar and could provide its support on the coordination process. Likewise, an updated version of the list of companies approved for the travel medical insurance, necessary for the visa application, could also be agreed upon.

[11] AT, BE, CZ, FI, FR, DE, EL, HR, HU, IT, MT, NL, PL, PT, ES, SE, CH

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3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades').

Following the implementation of the new Visa Code, LSC MS suggested a more generous local cascade, which should be applied only to Qatari citizens. According to the Commission's Implementing Decision of 12.01.2022, C(2022) 27, Qatari nationals could receive a multi-entry visa as long as the validity of their passport, minus the three last months. The decision was based on the recommendation of the local LSC group which took into consideration the socio-economic situation of the country and its citizens as well as the subsequent migratory risks (or lack thereof).

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Despite the lack of a formalised harmonisation list of documents to be submitted, LSC MS discuss and adopt practices to ensure a harmonised application of the new Visa Code. In the context of the regular challenges met by LSC MS in their relations with the External Service Providers, LSC MS have carried out inspection visits to application centers to ensure harmonisation of practices.

3.5 Exchange of information

MS regularly discussed their experience with the External Service Provider and exchanged best practice as to the enforcement of legal and contractual obligations.
MS circulated amongst each other cases of suspected fraud bilaterally or by means of the LSC mailing list.
LSC MS regularly discussed the situation of people from countries of high risk, including Syria, Yemen and Sudan, in view of the guarantees given by a number of EU governments to refugees arriving on their territories.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

EU Delegation and EU MS, in the context of the new Visa Code and the recent Implementing Decision of the Commission of 2022, could explore the possibility to design, share online, print and distribute a Common Information Sheet (article 48 (2) Visa Code) in English and Arabic.

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4. Challenges

The greatest challenges for the LSC MS are related to the application of non-Qatari / non-GCC nationals. Their applications have to be thoroughly examined. Not only foreign low-skilled workers pose migratory risks, also white-collar-workers can be replaced by Qatari citizens anytime and thus might lose their right to reside in Qatar. In addition, residence permits for family members are costly and difficult to get. To many, life in EU MS seems more comfortable.
It has also be noted that oftentimes travel agencies are tasked by Qatari nationals with the preparation of their visa applications which result in fake airline tickets/ hotel reservations. More rarely also fake bank statements, even if Qatari nationals are believed to be bona fide travellers, with significant financial capacity.

5. Other issues

The Commission had proposed that Qatari nationals are waved of the obligation to have a visa before entering the Schengen area, but due to the European Parliament alleged scandal of December 2022, the process has been frozen. This has led to the disappointment of the Qatari authorities and nationals. During 2023, Qatari authorities brought up the issue during their meetings with EU institutions/ MS officials.

This report was discussed at the DCM meeting held on 9th of January and revised in written form thereafter; it was endorsed by LSC MS through a silence procedure on the 11th of February 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in the RUSSIAN FEDERATION 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

All EU Member States are present in Moscow. CH and NO are also represented, while operations of the IS Embassy in Moscow have been suspended as of 1 August 2023.

In 2023, a significant number of consulates were closed. At the end of the year, BG, CY, FR, DE, ES, GR, HU, IT, PL, RO, SLO and SK were represented in St Petersburg, BG, CY, FR and HU in Yekaterinburg, PL and LT in Kaliningrad, LT in Sovetsk, PL in Smolensk and Irkutsk, RO in Rostov-on-Don, GR in Novorossyisk, CY in Samara and Krasnodar, and HU in Kazan.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Due to expulsions of diplomatic and consular staff of EU Member states (MS), most MS have limited resources and capacities for issuing visas.

During the reporting period, three LSC meetings were organised (5 April by the Swedish Presidency, 20 September and 29 November by EUDEL). After an interruption due to expulsions of staff in autumn 2022, the EUDEL is since September 2023 again organising and chairing LSC meetings.

EUDEL draws up the meetings' reports and disseminates them through ZEUS before their final adoption at the subsequent meeting. EUDEL asks MS for input to the meetings' agenda. The meetings are generally well attended. Bulgaria and Romania were invited to the LSC meetings.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

- **More than half of MS do not issue Schengen visas or restrict them to certain categories of applicants.** 12% do not issue any uniform visas, while 46% issue them only to certain categories of applicants. Remaining MS have not reported any restrictions to the categories of applicants which may be granted visas.
- Overall, there has been a **sharp increase of the refusal rate.** However, refusal rates show **significant discrepancies** between MS**.** The reported refusal rates vary between 5% and 40%. The reasons for this should be explored further. However, it may be noted that countries accepting specific categories only (including travel for humanitarian reasons or

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business) usually have a lower refusal rate. Those that are more open to a wider range of travel purposes usually, but not always, have a higher rate.[12]

- The most frequent **reasons for rejecting** visa applications are insufficient explanation of the purpose of travel, visa shopping, risk of no return and insufficient means of subsistence.
- **Overall longer processing times**: 60% of MS issue visas in less than 15 days, 20% use a full month 20% use the maximum time allowed by the Visa Code, i.e. 45 days.
- **Significant discrepancies as regards the period of validity**. 85% of MS issue visas for a single entry, normally covering only the period of travel. However, a minority of MS continue to issue visas for the maximum duration of five years.
- **Major increase in visa shopping**. This appears to be a negative consequence of the diverging practices among Schengen countries.[13]

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

Further to the suspension of the Visa Facilitation Agreement, the Group agreed in September on the need to **revise the 2016 Commission Decision** setting out the harmonised list of supporting documents. Additional categories should be addressed, in particular seafarers and applicants intending to travel for the purpose of medical treatment. A new working group was established, taking into account the work already initiated but suspended in February 2022. Following discussion of the new proposal in the Group, the locally agreed text, including one new proposed requirement in brackets, was submitted in December to the European Commission for consideration by the Visa Committee and for future adoption of a new Commission Decision.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In line with the Commission guidelines on stricter visa processing for RU citizens, there is a **significantly lower proportion** of multiple entry visas (MEVs). Any MEVs still issued have a shorter validity and very rarely exceed one year.[14] While it has not been possible due to resource constraints to revoke MEVs on the ground that holders no longer meet the conditions, the Group noted that the number of valid MEVs is steadily decreasing.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

A contributing factor to the major increase in visa shopping might be the diverging visa fee exchange rates in the absence of an ECB rate. These result in differences of nearly 2000 RUB for the 80 EUR fee. EUDEL repeated the proposal to consider the **reference rate of the Central Bank of Russia** as a common benchmark.

[12] One MS notes that, according to the statistics, several countries who accept only limited visa categories also have high refusal rates. These discrepancies can be explained the volume of visa applications and different profiles of applicants.
[13] One MS observes that visa shopping is a direct consequence of applicants' inability to obtain visas for their intended destinations which inflates the refusal rates of other MS.
[14] One MS holds that harmonization should not imply adopting the strictest national policies, as the differences in visa validity period are related to the diverse types of applicants and their profile/visa usage record (for example. short term tourists vs persons with long standing family ties or frequent travellers).

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At least one MS publishes a special **list of approved insurance companies** for issuing travel medical insurance (TMI). The list is a point of reference in the ongoing work of proposing a consolidated list of TMI providers accepted throughout the EU (see point 3.5 below).

3.5 Exchange of information

The **quarterly statistics** showed gaps in the 2022 and 2023 reporting. The complete statistics for 2023 were compiled in early 2024 while the quarterly reporting has resumed.

As regards **national entry restrictions**, an updated table was prepared showing the situation at the border check points (BCPs) at the external land border. This includes the latest information on the closure of BCPs and on the implementation of sanctions, notably the import of motor vehicles.

An exchange on the implementation of the **guidelines on non-accepted travel documents** was held in September 2023. No implementation difficulties were reported.

As regards cooperation with **external service providers**, the Group discussed a request for support from VFS Global. In view of sanctions forbidding the export of certain equipment to RU, the company is applying for a US Commerce Department license for VFS Russia to avoid challenges with replacing/upgrading hardware.

Potential **cases of fraud** were flagged by one MS. Details of an agency allegedly assisting German, Italian, English and Spanish language students were circulated in writing.

Some MS accept **travel medical insurance** (TMI) from EU companies only. Others accept also RU TMIs, provided that these RU insurance companies have a counter-part or branch office in the EU confirming that it is able to pay out any insurance claims.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The Group held an exchange on **practices in the area of international protection** and travel documents against the background of a large number of requests from RU citizens having left the country to avoid mobilisation, as well as from Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), dissidents and members of the opposition. Several MS do not consider draft evasion as a sufficient reason for international protection. As regards HRDs, dissidents and members of the opposition, the Group took note that many do not wish to leave RU permanently but are in need of temporary protection. Therefore, they seek “humanitarian visas”, ideally a Schengen visa which will allow them to rapidly leave RU. While either a Schengen or national visa is possible, supporting documents is often required from a hosting body. Only a minority will seek asylum, *inter alia* due to the difficulty of collecting the required evidence.

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4. Challenges

Noting the large discrepancies in refusal rates between countries open to all categories of applicants, EUDEL has reminded the Group of the Commission guidelines on stricter visa processing for RU citizens, notably the need for a **strict assessment of security risks**. Members of the Group are encouraged to flag any practical difficulty in implementing the guidelines.

In view of the shift away from uniform visas, EUDEL will initiate a survey on the issuance of visas with **limited territorial validity and residence permits** for RU citizens.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF RWANDA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in RWANDA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Eight Member States (BE, DE, DK, FR, HU, NL, PL, SE) and one Associated Schengen State (CH – with a cooperation office) are present in Rwanda. DK, HU are diplomatic offices, the other six are embassies.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

EU Delegation and Member/Associated States in Rwanda held two Local Schengen cooperation meetings, chaired by EUD, in February and June 2023. Due to staff movements and VIP visits a third meeting was postponed to the first semester 2024 (25 April). Meetings were very well attended. EUD established reports, consulted these with all participants and submitted them to HQ. This annual report was consulted with MS on 25 April.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Belgium represents Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. France took over visa applications at their Embassy from Sep 18, 2023. Other Schengen or Associated States handle visa applications through their competent Embassies in the region. BE in Kigali is also responsible for processing visa applications of Congolese citizens resident in North and South Kivu and representing also Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden and Germany (only Congolese nationals for Germany) for this region, with approximately 1500 applications out of a total of 11.000 applications in 2023.

EU and MS in Rwanda are generally well prepared to ensure the execution of tasks as per the Visa Code. However, there were some issues regarding delays in 2023. Between May and October, the Belgian consular services were not able to respect the obligations of Art. 9 of the Visa Code to provide an appointment within a period of two weeks from the date when the appointment was requested. There were some delays in the summer peak period, mainly due to change in personal and reduced capacity. As a result, some travellers had to postpone their travels. However, since the backlog is resolved, delays are back to normal periods and obligations are respected.

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The Belgian Embassy asked their Ministry to increase the capacity of the visa section, by beginning 2024 an additional staff (document verification officer) was approved (started 15 April). Follow up is being made to further increase the capacity of the Embassy to ensure the proper implementation of the Visa Code.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already accomplished. There is no need for an amendment at this time.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas of the Visa Code were applied among the Embassies concerned; however, given the limited number of actors, there are no coordination issues.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

There have been no further initiatives on the harmonisation of practices.

3.5 Exchange of information

Member States have exchanged on the number of visa applications and the number of visa issued. In 2023, MS processed and issued the following number of C-visas:

BE: 11039 requested – 8050 delivered
FR: 989 requested – 640 delivered
DE: 146 requested – 142 delivered
NL: 5 requested - 5 delivered

There is a regular exchange of information on issues, such as the application of Council recommendations, acceptance of Rwandan digital certificate, cases of fraud, cooperation with banks, or the use of external service providers.

4. Challenges

There continue to be challenges regarding the authenticity and legalisation of documents electronically delivered by the authorities, which the LSC group members are still trying to address with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Protocol services in order to facilitate relevant visa and consular processes.

There have also been issues about false bank statements. The verification of bank statements is time consuming and onerous on consular staff, and some banks do not cooperate in confirming the authenticity of documents presented to the Embassies.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in SAUDI ARABIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

A total of 19 Schengen Member States[15] (MS) are represented in Riyadh. Three of them[16] also have consulates in Jeddah. All Schengen member states except Poland are making use of an external service provider to collect and process visa applications. All the countries use the services of VFS Global with the exception of Spain and Slovakia, which use BLS International and Germany working with TLS contact. Italy will start in 2024 to work with a consortium of Almaviva and VFS Global, after a year of suspension of activities with VFS.

The majority of these LSC MS use the company's visa application centres in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam; a few others use the company's visa application centre only in Riyadh or only in Jeddah. There is also a VFS office for Aramco employees in Dhahran.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC group met once a month physically at the EU Delegation. The meetings are chaired by the EUD. LSC meetings are open to all EUMS as observers. Meetings were always well attended with usually 15-16 MS present.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The LSC MS have agreed that the new Visa Code is unnecessarily restrictive to KSA travellers and contrary to its initial purpose, it adds administrative burden on consulates. Therefore, they have proposed the adoption of a more generous 'local cascade', which has been adopted on 24 November 2022 (see 3.3 below).

In 2023, the Local Schengen Cooperation in Saudi Arabia worked on a new proposal to allow Saudi nationals who fulfil the entry conditions for multi-entry visas to be issued with a validity period of five years, therefore aligning the rules with those applicable for Qatar and Kuwait. The proposal was formally approved in January 2024.

[15] AT, BE, CZ, DK, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, MT, NL, PL, PT, ES, SE, SK, CH, NO
[16] FR, DE, IT

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

In October 2018, the Visa Committee adopted the new harmonised list of supporting documents to be presented by visa applicants in Saudi Arabia. In December 2021, the Schengen MS agreed on an updated version of the list of companies approved for the travel medical insurance, necessary for the visa application.

3.3 Adaptation of the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades').

KSA nationals represent very low migratory risk for Schengen states and they have not been a source of concerns for any other visa related matters. Rejection of visa applications for KSA nationals have been rare in the recent years. Equally, the GCC nationals residing in KSA match the same criteria as the one met by KSA nationals. Contrary to these two categories, rejection rates are commonly related to applications by migrant workers mostly from the MENA region, Asia and Africa, for which the Visa Code cascade continues to be applied, especially since the "Saudisation" process of the local job market has created instability and unpredictability to job security for non-Saudis.

On the basis of a proposal by LSC, the Commission adopted in November 2022 adapted rules for multi-entry visas for KSA citizens and GCC residents in KSA. Under the new rules, visas for Saudi nationals and GCC residents in KSA should be issued for a period of 1 year (if they previously used a Schengen visa), then 3 years and finally 5 years.

The LSC nevertheless considers that the issuance of visa should be harmonised across the GCC, to the extent that the migratory and security risk related to short-stay visas are similar, Therefore, following announcement of more favourable visa rules for Qatari and Kuwaiti nationals, the LSC started work on a proposal to update the rules to allow Saudi Arabian nationals who fulfil the entry conditions a multi-entry visas to be issued with a validity period of five years directly.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Following the new harmonised list entered into force, LSC MS discuss and adopt practices to ensure a harmonised application of the new list and the need to keep its elements publicly available. LSC reviewed and ensured the correct implementation of the new harmonised list, including the consulates in Jeddah.

In the context of the regular challenges met by LSC MS in their relations with the External Service Providers, some LSC MS have individually carried out inspection visits to the Riyadh, Jeddah and Khobar visa application centers to ensure harmonisation of practices.

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3.5 Exchange of information

LSC MS regularly discuss the visa policy and consular developments in the Kingdom. They exchange information and best practices on individual cases. In selected cases, the EU Delegation reaches out to the Saudi authorities on behalf of the Member States requesting information of general applications regarding visa requirements in particular.
MS regularly discussed their experience with the External Service Provider and exchanged best practice as to the enforcement of legal and contractual obligations.
MS circulated amongst each other cases of suspected fraud bilaterally or by means of the LSC mailing list.
LSC MS regularly inform their consulates in Jeddah of the outcomes of the LSC meetings.

The EU Delegation will explore the possibility of holding regular (twice per year) meetings with Saudi authorities and the Member States on consular issues.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

4. Challenges

The greatest challenges for the LSC MS are related to the application of non-Saudi / non-GCC nationals. Their applications have to be thoroughly examined as forged documents in certain applications are not rare.
Saudisation policies also pose a risk for EU workers who can be replaced by Saudi citizens anytime and thus might lose their right to reside in KSA. In addition, residence permits for family members are costly.
Moreover, visa application centres should be closely monitored with regards to the conveying of the message that all Schengen countries should receive a united, uniform approach from all centres throughout KSA. MS regularly raise issues related to recurring number of mistakes.

5. Other issues

N/A

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UNION EUROPEENNE
DELEGATION AU SENEGAL

COOPERATION LOCALE AU TITRE DE SCHENGEN ENTRE LES CONSULATS ET LES ETATS-MEMBRES (LSC) au SENEGAL
RAPPORT 2023

1. Introduction

Au Sénégal, 15 Etats Membres Schengen (EMS) sont présents : Allemagne, Autriche, Belgique, Espagne, France, Finlande, Grèce, Irlande, Italie, Luxembourg, Pays-Bas, Pologne, Portugal, République Tchèque et Suisse.

En 2023, 12 postes consulaires des EMS (Allemagne, Autriche, Belgique, Espagne, France, Grèce, Italie, Pays-Bas, Pologne, Portugal, République Tchèque, Suisse) ont délivré des visas aux ressortissants du Sénégal et des pays qui se trouvaient sous leur juridiction respective. Au 1er février 2024, le Luxembourg, avec l'ouverture d'une section consulaire (la 13ème au Sénégal), a démarré la délivrance de visas pour les résidents du Sénégal. Les visas pour le Luxembourg pour les résidents du Sénégal étaient jusqu'alors délivrés par la Belgique. La plupart des Ambassades des Etats membres au Sénégal sont accrédités pour plusieurs pays de la région, pour certaines jusqu'à 9 pays.

Concernant les Etats Membres sans sections de visas à Dakar, 7 Etats Membres disposent d'accords pour la délivrance des visas avec 3 EM représentés (l'Estonie, la Finlande et la Slovénie avec la France, la Hongrie et Malte avec l'Autriche, la Suède et la Slovaquie avec les Pays-Bas). La Suisse représente la Lettonie. Pour l'Irlande, qui a ouvert une nouvelle ambassade à Dakar au début de 2023, la délivrance des visas aux ressortissants du Sénégal reste gérée par l'ambassade à Abuja.

Le 21 juin 2023, la Délégation de l'Union européenne (DUE) a organisé **une première réunion informelle entre le Groupe de Coordination local Schengen (LSC) et les autorités sénégalaises sur les visas (cf. 3.5)**.

Étant donné que **la problématique de la fraude documentaire et de la falsification de documents** reste très présente (comme dénoncée par l´Espagne, suivie par la France et des autres EMS), il a été décidé de créer un **groupe de travail sur ce sujet** à l'initiative de la Suisse, avec le soutien de l'Allemagne et de la DUE dans le cadre d´un effort commun et soutenu des EMS et de la DUE à Dakar.

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2. Réunions LSC organisées en 2023

Quatre réunions régulières du groupe LSC se sont tenues durant l'année 2023, à savoir le 28 mars, 27 juin, 03 octobre et 20 décembre. Elles se sont tenues en personne, à la DUE. Les réunions LSC sont présidées par la DUE, au niveau de la Cheffe de la Section Politique, presse et information (PPI).

Les réunions régulières qui se sont tenues en 2023 se sont concentrées sur le partage d'informations (statistiques visa, cas de fraude consulaire, filières d'immigration irrégulière etc.), sur l'application de l'harmonisation de documents justificatifs, ainsi que sur des points d'actualité. Des informations plus ponctuelles ont également été échangées par email et/ou via les groupes WhatsApp et Signal, à l'initiative de la DUE ou des EMS.

Comme déjà en 2022, plusieurs EMS ont proposé d'avoir des échanges plus réguliers (mensuels) dans un cadre informel, en alternant les ambassades des EMS afin d'avoir un coordination plus étroite et suivi concernant les enjeux communs tels que l'augmentation significative du nombre de demandes de visas Schengen, la gestion des demandes et les problèmes liés à cette augmentation, la fraude consulaire, y compris les problèmes de fraude documentaire et de falsification de documents, les actions conjointes possible et l'harmonisation des documents justificatifs.

Dans ce contexte, différentes initiatives ont été proposées par les EMS. Un petit-déjeuner de travail a été organisé par l'Ambassade du Luxembourg le 24 mai afin de discuter des questions d'ordre consulaire et Schengen. À la suite des manifestations du mois de juin, des réunions ad-hoc ont eu lieu les 07 juin et 26 juillet à la DUE et le 20 juin à l'Ambassade de France, portant, en particulier, sur la gestion des situations d'urgence ou de crise, la vérification et la mise à jour du Cadre Conjoint européen de préparation aux crises consulaires, ainsi que les procédures et moyens de communication en cas de crise.

La DUE établit l'ordre du jour des réunions, incluant les contributions des EMS. Un système de rotation a été suggéré pour la rédaction des comptes rendu de réunion mais pas encore mis en œuvre. Les EMS participent activement aux réunions LSC.

3. État des lieux

3.1 Application du Code des Visas

Les EMS appliquent le Code des visas. L'Espagne, la France, l'Italie, les Pays-Bas, la Belgique et le Portugal ont externalisé la réception des demandes de visas (société VfS Global pour la France, les Pays-Bas, le Portugal - depuis septembre 2018, la société BLS pour l'Espagne et l'Italie - depuis Juillet 2023, TLS Contact pour la Belgique - depuis septembre 2021).

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Avec la levée des restrictions COVID-19, le nombre de demandes de **visas Schengen** traitées avait fortement augmenté de 2021 à 2022. Les informations disponibles confirment également pour 2023 une nouvelle augmentation des demandes traitées pour certains EMS concernés. Exemples: pour l'Allemagne les demandes de visas Schengen traitées ont augmenté de 22% (de 2 367 en 2022 à 2 887 en 2023), pour l'Autriche de 12% (de 677 en 2022 à 771 en 2023) et pour la Suisse de 38% (de 2000 en 2022 à 2 761 en 2023).

En conséquence de l'augmentation des demandes de visas, mais aussi du rôle joué par les officines qui fonctionnent comme intermédiaires en bloquant les créneaux de rendez-vous, plusieurs consulats font face à une pénurie permanente de disponibilité de rendez-vous pour la présentation de demande de visas (difficulté qui existe aussi dans d'autres pays de la région). Dans certains cas, il a été observé que les rendez-vous ouverts par un consulat pour un mois entier ont été emplis en une heure seulement.

Depuis son entrée en vigueur, les EMS ont commencé à appliquer le Code de Visas révisé comme prévu, sans difficultés majeures.

3.2 Estimation du besoin d'harmonisation de la liste des documents justificatifs.

Après discussion au Comité Visa le 22 janvier 2019, qui a donné son avis positif au projet discuté localement par le Groupe LSC, la liste harmonisée de documents a été adopté le 6 mai 2019. Il n'y avait pas de difficultés majeures dans son application. Les pratiques concernant les documents justificatifs devant être fournis par les demandeurs de visas sont discutées lors des réunions LSC. Plusieurs EMS ont suggéré d'inclure de nouvelles catégories (ex : « athlètes/sportifs ») dans la liste harmonisée. Un exercice de révision de la liste pourrait donc être proposé en 2024.

3.3 Estimation du besoin d'adapter les règles générales relatives à la délivrance des visas à entrées multiples aux demandeurs en vertu de l'Article 24(2) du Code des Visas (« cascades MEV »)

En ce qui concerne les MEV, les EMS ont donné leur accord de principe sur la convenance d'harmoniser les pratiques au niveau local et l'utilité du système en cascade, d'ailleurs appliqué couramment. Par contre, il n'y a pas un accord unanime localement pour l'adoption d'un système en cascade uniforme et fixe, qui limiterait la marge de décision local de chaque consulat. Les différences entre les différents profils des demandeurs de visas, notamment entre la France et d'autres EMS, rendraient difficile aussi l'accord sur des critères à appliquer de façon homogène. En ce qui concerne l'octroi des visas de moins de 5 ans, elles sont courantes en raison de la validité des passeports sénégalais (5 ans).

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3.4 Harmonisation des procédures

La plupart des EMS utilisent le **système de communication VIS Mail**, sauf exceptions. Les Pays-Bas confirment que dans leur cas la transmission d'information se fait au niveau des capitales. La Belgique décrit leur système de partage d'information qui permet des échanges, mais qui ne permet aucun fichage de fichier avec des données privée (en raison du RGPD).

3.5 Echange d'informations

Conformément aux dispositions du code des visas, les réunions de coordination trimestrielles et la liste de diffusion servent à échanger les informations notamment sur les aspects suivants:

- Les cas de fraude documentaire (falsification des documents de voyage, utilisation de plusieurs identités et des passeports par la même personne, abus d'utilisation des passeports diplomatiques etc.).
- Les cas de fraude dans l'utilisation de visas et d'identification de falsification de visas.
- Les filières d'immigration clandestine (demandes de groupes avec faux buts de voyage: religieux, sportif, culturel, etc).
- Le manque de fiabilité d'actes d'état civil.
- Le partage d'expériences sur la vérification d'authenticité des documents délivrés par les autorités du Sénégal et les pays sous la juridiction des Consulats basés au Sénégal.
- La viabilité des sociétés d'assurance de voyage.

En 2023, la compilation et la mise à jour des statistiques sur les visas a été assurée par certains EMS, à tour de rôle de six mois. Comme en 2022, beaucoup des EMS n'ont été en mesure de mettre à jour les statistiques, face à une surcharge de travail tant du côté des EMS que de la DUE. En effet, la quantité de données à collecter en vertu de l'article 48 (3a) est toujours considérée comme trop vaste. Néanmoins, il y a eu des échanges réguliers sur les tendances et les chiffres pertinents lors des réunions de coordination trimestrielles. Au cours de ces premiers mois de l'année 2024, les EMS sont en train de tenter de compléter les statistiques de 2023. Pour l'année 2024 en cours, les États essaient d'assurer un partage écrit et régulier des statistiques.

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3.6 D'autres initiatives prises en LSC

La première **réunion entre le Groupe de Coordination local Schengen (LSC) et les autorités sénégalaises sur les visas du 21 juin 2023** s'est révélée utile en particulier pour 1) établir un contact entre les EMS et les autorités sénégalaises traitant des questions consulaires et visa; 2) permettre un échange ouvert et franc sur les problèmes perçus de part et d'autre sur les questions liées au traitement des Visa au Sénégal, une question qui revient fréquemment dans les médias mais aussi à l'Assemblée Nationale au Sénégal; 3) identifier de possibles pistes de collaboration afin de résoudre certains problèmes qui se posent de manière chronique (par exemple le travail des officines) mais aussi pour améliorer la communication et disponibilité de l'information sur cette question, de part et d'autre. Bien que la démarche ait été appréciée par les EMS, beaucoup d'entre eux ont par la suite fait part de leur déception quant à la teneur des échanges, et notamment le manque de connaissances et de préparation du côté des autorités sénégalaises. Certains ont également déploré les reproches faites à la partie européenne, notamment sur les délais importants pour l'obtention de visa, sans pour autant sentir un engagement ou une prise de conscience quant aux responsabilités qui incombent à l'Etat sénégalais afin de lutter contre le problème des officines qui joue un rôle néfaste sur le bon fonctionnement du processus. Toutefois, de manière générale, le groupe LSC a reconnu l'utilité de cette réunion et exprimé le souhait que ce type d'échange avec les autorités puisse avoir lieu de manière régulière. La partie sénégalaise a également réitéré ce souhait dernièrement lors du troisième dialogue avec l'UE sur les retours et les réadmissions le 5 décembre 2023.

La **première réunion du groupe de travail nouvellement créé sur la problématique de la fraude documentaire et de la falsification de documents** a eu lieu le 23 janvier 2024. L'objectif est d'organiser des réunions mensuelles, organisées en alternance par les EMS afin de fournier une plateforme d'échange plus étroit et de transfert de connaissances sur différents sujets liés à la falsification/fraude de documents entre les EMS, ainsi que de la formation ciblée sur des sujets particuliers pour le personnel transférable et local et de l'identification de projets possibles pour soutenir les autorités sénégalaises, mais aussi les EMS à mieux maîtriser le problème de la fraude et de la falsification de documents. Les États n'excluent pas d'ouvrir certaines réunions aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Unis et au Canada.

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4. Défis

Comme l'année précédente, la fraude documentaire et la falsification des documents continuent à constituer un défi important au Sénégal et dans d'autres pays de la région dans lesquels les EMS basés à Dakar sont accrédités, notamment la Guinée. Des cas de fraude et fraude documentaire sont reportés par rapport aux applications de visas de toute sorte, court et longue durée (tourisme et affaires, accompagnants, conférences et groupes culturelles, visites familiales, réunification, etc). De documents faux ou contenant de fausse information sont reportés : les documents justificatifs, les lettres d'invitation, les documents de voyage, y compris des passeports diplomatiques.

Ainsi, la fraude documentaire demeure un problème récurrent au Sénégal, comme c'est également le cas dans d´autres pays de la région. Le problème est aggravé par le fait qu'il s'étend aussi à des documents qui concernent des mineurs d'âge.

De véritables réseaux, de plus en plus professionnels, spécialisés en production ou légalisation de (faux) documents d'état civil se sont développés dans la région.

Il est donc important que les États Schengen poursuivent leur approche commune et coordonnée dans la lutte contre la fraude documentaire et la falsification de documents.

La non-fiabilité des documents d'état civil au Sénégal et dans certains autres pays de la région (Guinée, Guinée Bissau, Gambie) continue à être un autre défi. Pour le Sénégal, la zone frontalière avec la Mauritanie et les communes précaires de Dakar sont en premier lieu concernées. Toutefois, il est important de bien faire la distinction entre le manque de fiabilité des documents d'état civil avec les falsifications de documents. Le programme européen « NEKKAL » tente de s'attaquer au premier problème.

Le cas spécifique des documents faux et fraudes liées à l'état civil des documents provenant de la Guinée est de la Gambie est souligné.

5. Divers

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in SRI LANKA/MALDIVES 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Five Member States are present and thirteen MS are represented in Sri Lanka. Two MS are represented with a visa application centre outside Colombo (in Jaffna, Northern Province) where traditionally a large number of applications come from as there is a large Tamil diaspora in most Schengen MS. For the Maldives, 5 MS are now present in Male with a visa application centre opened in 2023.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Four meetings were held in 2023. The EU convened, chaired and drafted the minutes submitted to MS for their final approval. Throughout the year, meetings have been well attended with an active and constructive participation of all members of the group. All MS have been regular in attendance and displayed cooperative spirit and synergies.

In view of the rising challenges MS face due to the precarious situation in the country, as Sri Lanka continues to emerge out of a deep socio-economic crisis that has changed the behaviour of Schengen applicants, MS felt the need for more coordination meetings and it was decided to hold meetings every two months in 2024 until the situation stabilises. Ad hoc meetings are organised when MS based in Delhi are visiting.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Most MS agree that the Visa Code has eased visa processing and allows for more predictability on workload. However, there is still no fully coordinated approach locally on the implementation of the cascade for Multiple Entry Visas under art. 24(2). Two MS, which apply the cascade systematically, would like to see more harmonisation. A top priority in 2024 is that all MS correctly interpret and apply the cascade.

In LSC meetings, some MS have raised that practices regarding visa appointments differ between MS, leading to a somewhat skewed burden-sharing and increased visa shopping that needs to be tackled. One MS introduced a waiting list which facilitated its own management. One MS noted additional visa shopping for countries which are no longer represented in Sri Lanka.

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All missions rely on the services of the external provider "VFS" in Sri Lanka and most have opened counters in the Maldives. There are no major issues in the Maldives as initial difficulties were tackled with training. Some MS indicated that in contrast to previous years there have increasingly been issues in Sri Lanka, for others no major issues were recorded.

The release of appointments and in particular, the opening of appointments have been an issue. MS signalled that many bookings are made from the same email address. One MS also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the services provided by VFS with applications being sent late, checklists poorly done and frequent losses of documents (incl. passports).

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

According to Schengen missions in Colombo, supporting documents requested from visa applicants have so far been in agreement with the harmonised list dated 13 October 2011.
There are issues regarding the authentication of documents and MS are now looking at best practices.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

On the implementation of the cascade over the past year, MS have noted the importance of developing a common understanding of the cascade as defined in the Visa Code given the inconsistencies that the group has increasingly experienced in interpretation.

One practical question was whether travel records pre-COVID or post-COVID were taken into account for the implementation of the cascade, which showed that MS have had different practices. One MS applies the cascade by looking at travel records post-COVID, while another considers travel history pre-COVID. MS noted that those falling into the genuine traveller category should benefit from the cascade.

EUD encouraged strict adherence to the visa code and insisted on a uniform implementation of the cascade. It requested members to address current discrepancies, starting from an exchange of statistical data and concrete cases.

3.4 Exchange of information

Although frank discussions take place during meetings, there is still room for improvement with regard to the exchange of statistics which is unevenly carried out by MS. A more systematic approach is still needed.

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Frauds are increasing. In 2023, cancelled hotel reservations continued to be a frequent occurrence. The most commonly forged documents were bank statements, fake employment certificates and MS encouraged entry ban notification in the SIS when forged documents are identified. Copies of visas have occurred. There were instances were fake documents were procured from Malaysia.

Close scrutiny by MS on seafarers' applications is still required. As new shipping companies emerged and a number of seafarers did not return, some seeking asylum in another MS, several MS have become stricter on this visa category. There has been a trend to falsify the invitation letter of bona fide companies.

Furthermore, tour operators regularly falsify documents without the knowledge of the applicant. Some Sri Lankans have been promised work visas for large sums of money in routine scams by fake work agencies. Some agents even sold fake appointments to applicants in front of the embassy itself. One MS reports fraud cases to the Bureau of Fraud Investigation in Colombo. Local authorities are interested in tackling frauds and cooperative in finding solutions and all MS are encouraged to do the same.

Some MS already work with IOM to check documents. Others are considering partnering as well. Discussions are ongoing within the group to harmonise practices and possibly establish a joint partnership with the IOM.

4. Challenges

As in 2022, the spike in Schengen visa requests has led to an increased workload for missions. The increased number of rejections has come with an increase in appeals that created an additional workload. At the end of 2022, all but one MS were satisfied with staffing. In 2023, the situation improved. The MS which had faced particularly challenging times due to scarce human resources got additional staff.

At the end of 2023, the need for a full-fledged posting of liaison officer in Colombo airport remained. As Sri Lankans need transit visas for all MS there is a heavy workload. Checks at the airport are badly needed and MS repeated this plea.

The Sri Lankan diaspora in Schengen MS has established efficient networks in support of these illegal flows. This issue will continue and will have to be tackled in close coordination with home ministries in capitals.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO SUDAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in SUDAN
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Prior to the outbreak of the armed conflict in Sudan on April 15, 2023, nine Member States (MS) (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland) were present in Sudan, all have their consular services centralised in the capital Khartoum. Poland and Norway did not however issue visas in Sudan. Norway just handled national visas.

In terms of local representation of non-resident Schengen: Germany also represented Estonia and Hungary; France represents Denmark; Italy represents Malta, Portugal and Slovenia; Netherlands represents Belgium, Luxembourg and Poland; Sweden represents Norway; and Switzerland represents the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria just for official visits for official passport holders.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During the reporting period, three (ad-hoc) LSC- meetings were held, in January, March and May. The European Migration Liaison officer of EUDEL hosted and chaired the meetings. Draft minutes were prepared by EUDEL, shared for approval before being submitted to the headquarters.

The following points were discussed during the LSC meetings: (i) update on visa-related trends; (ii) Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents, (iii) exchange information on different practices with the participation of representatives of the Canadian immigration office; (iv) Update on the passports of the Sudanese visa applicants locked inside the LSC Embassies following the outbreak of the conflict on April 15; (v) Visa section operations following the evacuation from Sudan.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, MS exchanged information with each other on a regular basis on different kinds of visa matters. MS and the EUDEL were ensuring the tasks foreseen for Local Schengen Cooperation under the Visa Code.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The possibility of drafting a harmonised list of supporting documents has been discussed and explored in the framework of the last LSC-meeting that was held in Sudan in March 2023. The EUDEL proposed to start work on a harmonised list of supporting documents, which the LSC members agreed to do. It was scheduled that the group will discuss further how to work on the harmonised lists in next LSC meeting. Following the evacuation of all the MS Embassies from Sudan, it was no longer possible to follow up on this point.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No problems reported on application of Article 24 while the MS were still operating from Sudan.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

While still based in Sudan, LSC members echanged and shared their respective experiences on regular basis on various matters related to visa application . LSC members applied the same visa fee. Some MS required visa fee to be paid in Euro, wheras other MS were charging it in the local currency.

3.5 Exchange of information

The LSC-meetings provided the best platform for exchange of information. The LSC members shared information, inter alia, about fraudulent cases and best practices to counter such cases to avoid reoccurring fraud schemes.

None of the MS that were resident in Sudan cooperated with external service providers, nor did they have accredited commercial intermediaries.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

The Head of Migration at the SE Embassy invited the LSC members, on January 17, to meet with the ID Expert, who is based at the SE Embassy in Istanbul, to disucss, among others, issues related to identity documents.

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On February 19, the EU Delegation with the close collaboration of DE Embassy in Sudan organised a half day training seminar on document verification techniques for LSC members and the local staff working in the visa sections. The training gathered 20 participants from all the LSC present in Sudan. The Airline Liaison officer and Visa Advisor, who is based at the DE Embassy in Cairo, but is also responsible for Sudan, provided the training. The training course covered different techniques for detecting fraudulent or altered documents. It strengthened the awareness of the participants on different types of document identified as more likely to be fraudulent. All the participants acknowledged that is was a good initiative to organise the half-day training session on document verification techniques.

4. Challenges

Shortly after the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan, there was a significant wide media coverage on passports of the visa applicants locked inside the Embassies, which were all evacuated. The MS looked actively into best options possible to provide individual support to the persons concerned.

The MS Embassies in the region, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, are now responsible for visa applications for Sudanese nationals.

5. Other issues

This annual report was drafted by the EUDEL and commented by LSC MS. All MS in the LSC Sudan have approved the final version.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO TANZANIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TANZANIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

12 Member States are represented in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. *(BE, CH, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IT, NL, NO, PL, SE).*

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Four LSC meetings were held in 2023:

- 19 January (**Attendance**: DE, CH, SE (Nairobi office). **Absent** : BE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IT, NL, NO, PL)
- 25 May (**Attendance**: DE, NL, PL, IT, CH, Online: BE, NO (Nairobi office), DG HOME. **Absent**: DK, ES, FI, FR, SE)
- 14 September (**Attendance**: uncertain)
- 14 December (**Attendance**: DE, BE, PL, CH. **Absent:** DK, ES, FI, FR, IT, NL, NO, SE).

EUD chaired all meetings and produced minutes.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The political section of the EUD lost its Junior Professional in Delegation post in 2022, which affected the affected capacity to ensure coordination for the first three quarters of 2023. From October 2023 the JPD post was filled thereby increasing capacity. Problems discussed included review of the harmonized list of supporting documents 2016, review of roles and responsibilities of the LSC group, consolidation and transmission of statistics, use of VISMail and harmonisation of practices.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

After the extensive discussion of the list of supporting documents in September 2022, EUD raised the necessity of explicit support from all missions before going to the Visa Committee. It was initially scheduled to be tabled at the Visa Committee in September/October 2023, but was postponed and it is expected to be adopted in the beginning of 2024.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The issue was discussed in 2021 without raising overdue alert on the need to adopt rules. The "Cascade" system is used when applicable by some MSs.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

During the LSC meetings, MSs exchanged experiences and practices about travel insurance reliability, verification of the authenticity of bank account statements and other supporting documents. The EUD encouraged LSC Member States during several meeting to use harmonised exchange rates for visa fees.

3.5 Exchange of information

Statistics were collected in 2023 from Member States in Tanzania. Member States shared information on overall tendencies and specific cases of fraud.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Not applicable.

4. Challenges

a) Challenges concerned some members' participation and poor communication flow.
b) In addition, visa applications for government officials continue to be problematic but they remain outside the scope of LSC harmonisation efforts because of political sensitivities.
c) There is sometimes lack of coherence between information received from DG HOME in relation to LSC group members' capitals.
d) Inviting external contributors to the meetings is also an option to share knowledge on topical issues and stimulate further harmonisation of practices.

5. Other issues

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THAILAND

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in THAILAND
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

19 Schengen States are present in Bangkok.[17]
16 are represented outside of Bangkok, in Chiang Mai and Phuket.
6 non-resident Schengen States are represented by resident Schengen States, (Visa Code, Article 8).[18]
Most Schengen States have outsourced their visa application processing services to external service providers : VFS Global (VFS), TLS Contact, or BLS International.

MS	AT	BE	CH	CZ	DE	DK	EL	ES	EU	FI	FR	HU	IT	LU	NL	NO	PL	PT	SE	SK
present	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
represents	MT				LT	IS				EE		LV								
represents	SI																			

MS	AT	BE	CH	CZ	DE	DK	EL	ES	FI	FR	HU	IT	LU	NL	NO	PL	PT	SE	SK
BKK	VFS	TLS	VFS	VFS	VFS	VFS		BLS	VFS	TLS	TLS	VFS		VFS	VFS		TLS	VFS	BLS
CNX[19]					VFS							VFS							
HKT[20]					VFS							VFS							

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC meetings in 2023:

- February 8th – 16 present
- May 8th – 13 present + RO observer
- September 7th – 16 present + RO observer
- November 8th – 15 present

The LSC group met four times in 2023. Meetings are organised at and chaired by the EU Delegation. LSC meetings are open to all EUMS as observers and Romania attended twice. Minutes are drafted by the EU Delegation and finalised after MS comments.

MS	AT	BE	CH	CZ	DE	DK	EL	ES	EU	FI	FR	HU	IT	LU	NL	NO	PL	PT	SE	SK
08 Feb	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X
08 May	X		X	X	X	X			X	X			X	X	X	X	X		X	
07 Sep	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X	X	X

[17] AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, LU, NL, NO, PL, PT, SE, SK
[18] Estonia (EE), Iceland (IS), Malta (MT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Slovenia (SI)
[19] CNX : Chiang Mai
[20] HKT : Phuket

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08 Nov	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X			X	X

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

No specific problems relating to the implementation of the Visa Code have been identified.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

EU Schengen States have applied the list since 15 September 2017 and have continued to exchange views on the practical application of the common list in subsequent LSC meetings. In 2023, there was discussion on the list, but no conclusion to change or amend the list.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Discussions on this topic have taken place with a view to finding agreement locally, but have not yet been successfully concluded. Most EU Schengen States implement the general cascade and don't see a need to adapt the general rules of the 'MEV cascades'.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

In the post-Covid-19 pandemic most countries reported significant increases in visa applications though most are not yet reaching pre-pandemic numbers.

3.5 Exchange of information

Overall sharing of the Quarterly statistics has improved in 2023, (compared to 2022).
Information is regularly shared about fraudulent documents or fraudulent activities that other Schengen States should be aware of either in the meeting or by e-mail.

Schengen States in Thailand have a common list of travel and health insurance companies and new applications are assessed during the LSC meetings. There are currently 44 companies on the common list. A few companies are in process to be added or changed company name.

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Some Schengen States consider the benefits of creating a list of bona fide travel agencies in Thailand as this could expedite the processing time. No final decision has been taken on this point. The VISMail and the Visa Information System are used by Schengen States, with some embassies having instructions to only use VISMail for visa related matters. Schengen States reported that while they do use VISMail as it is not very practical and user-friendly, (some Schengen States indicate challenges with sending or receiving/opening attachments), and emails sometimes take several days to arrive.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Nothing to report.

4. Challenges

The following challenges were listed in the LSC Annual Report (2022) and were addressed as follows:

- Further improve the sharing of the quarterly statistics, the exchange of information, trends, and problems encountered.
  Overall sharing of the Quarterly statistics has improved in 2023 (see 3.5 above).
- Further explore the creation of a list of bona fide travel agencies in Thailand as well as reporting on travel agencies that may need closer scrutiny.
  Information has been regularly shared but no list has been created.
- Create SOP in order to facilitate business continuity from outgoing to incoming Embassies' LSC staff.
  This point has not been prioritised in 2023.

For the next reporting period, (LSC 2024), Schengen States agree:

- Structure the LSC meetings' recurring agenda point on "Visa services and exchanges/harmonisation practices" in a more structured and efficient way in order to free more time for other important topics on the agenda.
- Evaluating the adoption of more favourable or stricter rules in the context of local cooperation based on and in line with the amendment to article 24 of the regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019, paragraph 18.c.2b amending Article 24.[21]
- Continue the discussion on changing or updating the harmonised list of supporting documents

5. Other issues

Nothing to report.

This report has been approved by the Local Schengen Cooperation Group in Thailand.

[21] Reference examples of implementation are accessible on DG HOME webpage

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO TUNISIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TUNISIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

In Tunisia, 17 EU Member States are present with fully-fledged embassies and consulates (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden). 14 of those deliver Schengen visas: of the remaining three Sweden is represented in visa matters by Finland; Bulgaria, Romania, were not yet members of the Schengen space in 2023. One non-EU Member State also delivers Schengen visas (Switzerland).

Several Member States hold representation agreements in relation to visas: Austria represents Slovenia; Belgium represents Luxembourg; Finland represents Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, and Norway. Switzerland represents Slovakia. Germany is representing Lithuania (and theoretically Latvia, which has been put on hold since COVID).

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

During 2023, five Local Schengen Cooperation meetings took place, all well attended by MS. The meetings were co-chaired by EUDEL and the MS holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (Sweden during the first half of the year, then Spain). The EU Delegation drafted reports of the meetings. The group also updated the Joint EU Crisis Preparedness Framework for Tunisia. In addition, regular informal consular lunches took place, including like-minded partners (CA/UK/US).

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

According to the category of visa, the main problems in implementing the Visa Code are (i) the availability of appointments for filing application due to applicants trying to obtain visas by fraud, and (ii) respecting the time allowed for processing the application. Consulates continue to be seriously stretched: both bigger and smaller consulates are understaffed considering the large number of applications received and the amount of fraudulent attempts.
During the year, several consulates report having managed to reduce waiting times. The vast majority of Member States are using the services of an external service provider to receive visa applications. (Some MS continue also to cover Libya from Tunis).

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All Member States collect biometric data, either directly in their consulates or via the contracted external service provider. The number of frauds and forgeries aiming at illegally obtaining a Schengen visa remains high. Most frequent frauds relate to fake bank statements, fake hotel reservations, forged insurance certificates, forged birth/marriage certificates, invitation letters from unreliable organisations, and false declarations on the social security coverage (CNSS).

During the LSC meetings, Member States share information about fraudulent cases and best practices to counter such cases to avoid recurring fraud schemes.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The list was harmonised in 2019. However, the Member States are open for new harmonisation propositions on Schengen visas based on Art. 48.1 of the Visa Code.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Few applicants have been eligible for the MEV Cascade considering the travel restrictions in force during the past years (reference period) due to the covid pandemic. Most consulates apply this principle in cases that meet the criteria under Article 24 (2). However, member States only issue multiple entry visas (MEVs) for periods of 1 to 2, 3 or 4 years. 5 year MEVs are not issued as the Tunisian passport only has validity for a maximum 5 years.

General practice by MS is to be more lenient than the default cascade suggests. A wish to keep flexibility at MS level was the main argument for not modifying the rules in 2023 ("if the rules are not binding, why modify then?").

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

There is a high awareness among consulates that cooperation is key to avoid visa shopping. While no other harmonisation initiatives have been presented during 2023, some discussions took place regarding the utility of request of travel reservation documents.

3.5 Exchange of information

Exchange of information takes place through email, telephone, WhatsApp, bilateral ad hoc meetings or through the regular LSC meetings. Statistics and other visa related questions are also circulated by email or shared during *tours de table* in LSC meetings. This information exchange relates to different challenges the Member States are facing, such as fraud cases and administrative barriers, visa shopping, interview procedures, waiting times, refusal rates, and statistics.

All Schengen consulates have access and are using the Visa Information System (VIS) but highlight that it is complicated to use, making it irrelevant, as many messages remain unanswered.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Instigated by the Swedish presidency, MS discussed the possibility to adapt the local cascade with the double purpose to facilitate travel for frequent or regular travellers and to lessen the burden on consulates. An adapted local cascade would be a part of larger discussion on migration, including readmission. The initiative was eventually not approved, for the reasons outlined above (3.3).

Statistics and information on legal migration schemes were exchanged with MS.

4. Challenges

Tunisians reaching Europe in an irregular way via the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy has remained at the same level as 2022 (approximately 17.000 people), probably due to socio-economic and political hardship. Given the high appetite to leave to Europe, a tightening of Schengen cooperation is essential. Visa services are under unprecedented pressure, due to a steep increase in requests, a decrease in the quality of applications, as well as difficulties related to massive fraud.

Particular attention should be paid to communicating on Schengen and other consular matters (informing about the possibilities of legal, circular migration; Talent Partnerships and the development of professional skills) considering the focus on this matter by media and the public opinion.

5. Other issues

While the sub-committee on migration and social affairs eventually took place in January 2023, it is still important to seek an effective communication channel with the Tunisian authorities and general public. Several interviews have been given by consuls on radio, TV and to the online press.

A common EU meeting was held with the authorities (MFA) at the end of the year at the initiative of the LSC group.

Approved by Member States present in Tunisia

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO TÜRKIYE

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TÜRKIYE
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

There are 4 consular constituencies in Turkey. In 2023, 21 Member States issued visa in Ankara (new member: Croatia), 16 in Istanbul (new member: Croatia), 3 in Izmir, and 1 in Edirne. The Local Schengen Cooperation (LSC Türkiye) convened, separately, in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC Türkiye meetings in Ankara took place in February, April, June, September, October, and November. In Istanbul in January, June, and September. In Izmir only in February. LSC Türkiye was chaired by the EU delegation, which also drew up reports.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Schengen visa remained high on Turkey's political agenda, taken up both in the electoral campaign and in the period thereafter. A series of press articles decried the perceived difficulties for Turkish nationals to get Schengen visa appointments to lodge applications, overdue waiting times for visa decisions, and high rate of refusals. Heads of Mission discussed Schengen visa issuance in November. At a dedicated meeting of Heads of Mission with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Bozay in December 2023, Türkiye presented a non-paper with proposals related to visa facilitation process for some categories of Turkish applicants.

Preliminary assessment of collected data points to continuous strong increase in visa applications in all three visa constituencies, with the benchmark of 1 million visa applications possibly reached in 2023.

In Ankara, visa applications rose by approximately 40 000 in total, from 178 000 to at least 219 000 (partial data available). Waiting times for lodging visa applications were broadly in line with Visa Code in majority of the consulates. However, 4-5 member states continued to note delays.

In Istanbul, the LSC noted a very large increase in visa applications by approximately 180 000 in total, from 499 000 in 2022 to 677 000 in 2023). Waiting times for lodging visa applications at the external service providers used to exceed the standard Visa Code requirements, while decision-making periods at the consulates were broadly in line with Visa Code.

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In Izmir, the consulates noted a large increases in visa applications by approximately 30 000 in total, from 90 000 in 2022 to 121 000 in 2023. The consulates experienced delays concerning waiting times for lodging visa applications at the external service providers, though decision-making periods were largely in line with Visa Code.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

While discussions took place to modify the harmonised list of 2021, no proposals was made in that respect.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

No new decisions. In 2022, LSC Türkiye decided to retain the status quo and not to propose a revision of the current system.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

LSC Türkiye discussed possible harmonisation of visa fees and exemptions/reductions according to Article 16 visa code and noted a large degree of harmonisation of existing practices.

3.5 Exchange of information

While keeping regular exchanges on visa statistics and operational capacities, LSC Türkiye discussed potential visa facilitations for certain categories of applicants against the background of recent EU re-engagement with Türkiye, including on truck drivers, with an ad hoc meeting in Ankara in October and a presentation about the role of truck drivers in migrant smuggling activities in June in Istanbul.

LSC Türkiye (Ankara) discussed the procedures for appeal and possible litigation after a visa refusal, noting diverging procedures, timelines, and costs according to national law regulations.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

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4. Challenges

LSC Türkiye noted continuous deterioration of economic conditions in Turkey, heavily affecting the savings and income of visa applicants – a crucial point of assessment. Worsening situation leads migrants look for illegal ways, including by abusing visa free transit and asylum requests (100 000 in 2023). LSC Türkiye also noted poor quality of high number of visa applications, instances of visa shopping, and document fraud. Additional scrutiny of visa applications became necessary and may lead to longer waiting times and more refusals.

5. Other issues

In the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in February 2023, LSC Türkiye discussed possible measures to take in the light of visa applications by Turkish nationals from the affected areas, notably close family members of EU citizens or TR citizens with residence permit in the European Union. Visa Code also offers flexibility to MS' consuls locally to decide how to apply certain provisions, including prioritising applications from victims, waiving or reducing the visa fee, or maintaining the possibility for applicants to lodge their applications directly at consulates.

In the wake of Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, characterised by a steep rise in numbers of Russian citizens in Türkiye, LSC Türkiye regularly discussed Schengen visa applications by Russians holding residence permit in Türkiye, and drew frequent updates of the situation.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO TURKMENISTAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in TURKMENISTAN
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Four EU Member States: DE, FR, IT, RO, are represented in Ashgabat. MS do not have consular presence outside of the capital.

In 2023, Schengen visas were issued by DE and IT. RO will start issuing Schengen visas as of 31 March 2024. IT additionally represents FR, while DE represents 13 other Schengen countries: BE, EE, FI, GR, LV, LU, NL, NO, AT, PT, SE, CH and ES. There are no general representation agreements with the remaining countries and issuing of their visas takes place upon ad-hoc written request from the unrepresented country.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Due to the limited capacity of the EU Delegation and MS Embassies' Consular Sections, and still limited travel opportunities in and out of Turkmenistan, MS agreed to hold only two LSC meetings in 2023, the number to be gradually increased up to the requirement of the Schengen Visa Code at a later stage.

The first meeting took place on 2 March, the second one - on 12 September 2023. The two MS who issue Schengen visas: DE and IT, were present at the meetings. The EU Delegation chaired the meetings and drew up meeting reports.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

In Turkmenistan, the Visa Code is being implemented in a well-coordinated manner by the MS Embassies' Consular Sections. MS reported no major problems with the implementation of the Code.

Until October 2022, DE issued business visas and transit-type C visas (necessary for connecting flights to US, KR, UK due to the change of terminals in Frankfurt) as Turkmenistan remained closed during the pandemic; IT was issuing business and mission visas. Since then, all kinds of visas are issued.

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Some visa shopping attempts have been detected throughout 2023 and will be addressed by harmonisation of practices in issuing visas.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

During 2023, MS agreed to and completed the harmonisation of the list of supporting documents. The draft list will be forwarded to the Visa Committee in 2024.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The need to adapt general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades') will be assessed in 2024.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

During 2023, MS started work on the creation of a common information sheet (as required by Article 47 (1) of the Visa Code). Close cooperation between the MS Embassies' Consular Sections with Schengen representations is taking place on a regular basis. If further need for harmonisation exists, this will take place in 2024.

3.5 Exchange of information

MS established the practice of quarterly exchange of statistics. In 2023, the following trends were observed:

- number of applications very stable since the resumption of visa issuance in 2022 after the easing of travel restrictions linked to the pandemic;
- increasing rate of denials as most of the trustworthy travellers already have a visa;
- denials because of doubts about willingness to return mostly regarding applicants from the Lebap and Mary regions, with a risk of illegal work in Europe, main countries of destination being in Central and Eastern Europe;
- increasing number of victims of visa fraudsters (promising work visas for up to 2000 USD, fraudsters are often Russian citizens and operate with British phone numbers, also using caller ID spoofing to display Embassy numbers, creating trust among victims);
- increasing number of applications for national visas for language courses and au pair employment.

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MS noted common problems encountered in the process of issuing visas:

- the lack of knowledge and/or disrespect of the deadlines for issuing visas, both by regular citizens and the authorities (there is a seven-day consultation period for Turkmen citizens);
- visa requests submitted on false pretext of attending events abroad, often with fake invitations;
- negative role played in this respect by some local travel agencies;
- insurance policies with non-compliant terms, or issued by sanctioned RU companies;
- emergence of trafficking in human beings and cash trafficking/money laundering, also including AF nationals; Central and East Europe being the target regions;
- cash based economy and mistrust towards the banking system in Turkmenistan makes checking financial means of travellers difficult, visa fees payed by cash with varying exchange rates.

4. Challenges

In 2023, MS gathered knowledge and exchanged information about unfair practices relating to visa applications. Exchange of such information allows for tackling these cases more efficiently.

The general situation with access to the Internet in Turkmenistan in 2023 slightly improved, with prices reduced and Internet speed increased. The changes are however not sufficient to positively reflect on applicants' ability to apply for visas online. Computer literacy and language requirements provide further difficulties for applicants who are exposed to unfair practices of companies offering assistance in applying for visas.

In 2024, LSC in Turkmenistan will submit to the Visa Committee a draft list of supporting documents.
MS will consider the need to establish a MEV cascade.
LSC meetings will be taking place amid diminished capacity of the EU Delegation to chair them.

The report was approved by the Member States on 05 March 2024.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in the UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

All 27 EU Member States are present in the UAE (all except for HR with a resident Embassy in Abu Dhabi). BG, DE, DK, FR, HR, IT, NL, and RO have Consulates General in Dubai. Three EU/Schengen MSs (DE, CH, NO) have dedicated Airport Liaison Officers in Dubai who also inform other MSs by courtesy when relevant. European Migration Officer (EMLO) for the Gulf region (UAE, Qatar, Oman) has been appointed at the DE Embassy in Abu Dhabi in cooperation between the European Commission and the German Federal Police since mid-2021. In 2023, EUDEL worked with the FR Embassy and Commission (DG HOME) to establish new Common Airport Liaison Officer (CALO) in Dubai / International Airport.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

EUDEL organised three formal LSC meetings (back-to-back with EU LCC); two additional informal meetings / anti-fraud trainings were organised by local rotating EU Presidencies (SE and ES); besides several ad hoc informal meetings to coordinate visa process and to prevent related damaging activities. No more travel restrictions remained in place, and since mid-2022 post-pandemic resumption of visa process by the EUMSs Embassies and CGs' visa sections culminated to its full capacity, esp. ahead of the summer season, and before the end of the year.

All LSC meetings were well attended (on average 20 out of 27 EUMSs present, plus CH and NO). In principle chaired by EUDEL, in coordination with the rotating EU Presidency. As agreed, CH and NO were invited to stay also for the (back-to-back) LCC meetings as observers. Minutes were drafted by the EUDEL and circulated to EUMSs' Embassies, together with other EUDEL's reports.

In 2023, the LSC/Consular group was one of the EUMSs Embassies' forum of coordination in preparation of the COP28 Climate Conference in Dubai (30/11-13/12), in particular regarding travel advice, consular crisis preparedness and possible human rights related consular cases. Consultations, updates, and exchange of expertise, incl. on Schengen visa related issues took place also via email and the EUDEL-established and administered WhatsApp Consular group.

Following similar attempt at the end of 2022, related to facilitation of (emergency) travel to/from football World Cup in Doha, which remained without any official reaction; EUDEL coordinated one diplomatic outreach vis-a-vis local authorities – a joint EU consular demarche related to insufficient information and cooperation provided by the local authorities in cases of imprisonment of EUMSs' citizens etc.; suggesting to improve cooperation in consular affairs in general. This ambition was not reciprocated (again); the attempt unwelcomed by the MoFA.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The LSC regularly discussed the implementation of the Visa Code as well as other issues relevant to the EU-UAE Schengen visa liberalization agreement (since 2015). Discussions have notably focused on discrepancies in EUMSs/VFS practices and capacity limits, which lead to the *visa shopping*. Particular attention was dedicated to regular exchanges on trends in documents fraud and misuse of visa applicants reservation system (overbooking vs. *dead* slots).

The LSC group discussed the implementation of the Visa Code (2020); but less frequently than in previous years regarding the application of the *cascade system* for GCC countries' nationals (KSA, KWT, QAT, BHR, OMN); this mainly due to the suspended visa facilitation negotiations with Kuwait an Qatar since autumn 2022. Concrete proposals had been discussed (pushed for esp. by NO) on the basis of Schengen MSs agreement reached previously in Doha, Qatar.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

For the locations where work on this <u>has</u> been completed:

The LSC in the UAE approved a list of supporting documents for visa applications in 2020. The harmonised list had been approved in the HQs/COM and entered into force. It was last reviewed in August 2022, and there was no discussion, nor identified need to revise it at that stage. The LSC group monitors and regularly discuss the harmonised list - as required / needed.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

In 2023, the group did not discuss any longer the application of the *cascade system* (ref. also to 3.1) related to longer validity of multiple entry visas for GCC countries' nationals for reasons indicated above. Given the overflow of (*lower quality*) Schengen visa applications and damaging activities of some local agents (ref. to illegal or irregular migration risks), local circumstances do not call for adapting the general rules for other groups of applicants. This issue may require further considerations.

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3.4 Harmonisation of practices

Led by SE PRES and EUDEL, in cooperation with VFS Global, LSC managed to identify and implement technical and procedural solutions to reduce the ratio of reservation systems' *no-shows*, and to enhance the capacity available for regular visa applicants; this in the context of constantly overbooked reservation systems and MSs / partners' capacities stretched. At the same time, as clarified by majority of the MSs, without any prospect to open up more / fully to the local visa demand due to significant risks of illegal migration towards Europe.

Another topic, regularly raised in the context of LSC coordination / harmonisation is a recurrent migration route via Dubai airport, given gradually easier conditions for transit, immigration, and residency permits in the UAE. In effect, for some MSs, their airlines, and ILOs in Dubai, it has become more difficult to assess immigration risk and verify passengers transiting from/via Dubai through airports in EU on their way to Latin America (esp. Mexico) and back to EU. Affected MSs planned to review requirements for transit visas for particular destinations and countries of origin, however difficult it may be to draw a correct line (e.g. CN, RU passengers).

3.5 Exchange of information

Given the constantly high demand and upward trend, MSs have been exchanging data (on a rather ad hoc basis) and discussing their actual availability of visa appointment slots and refusal rates. Cases of fraud increased with post-pandemic re-opening of Embassies' visa sections; the issue has become a regular topic discussed by LSC - in cooperation with PLO/ILOs; dedicated expert trainings to prevent this problem took place in March and Nov 2023 (and Jan 2024).

Cooperation with local authorities and companies continues to be challenging, for instance as regards verification of visa applicants' residential status (after relevant stickers and records in passports were replaced by local authorities' digital evidence in 2022), bank statements, employer's testimonials, travel medical insurance. General lack of reactiveness from the local authorities has been witnessed, in consequence of lack of capacities and/or digitalised services.

One MS reported an incident of non-standard practice by the VFS staff possibly exposing applicants' personal data; no data breach was confirmed and the practice was already rectified. No other major issues were related to cooperation with external service providers (VFS Global, BLS International). The problems with overbooking / insufficient slots, and in general lower than desired amount of Schengen visas issued altogether in the UAE, have been causing general delay in the Schengen visa application processes, and occasionally lead to a negative publicity in the local media, esp. ahead of peak travel seasons (summer and winter).

EU DEL has been updating local authorities and MSs' Embassies and CGs on the new border Exit/Entry System and the (delayed) launch of ETIAS; a coordinated communication campaign which was supposed to target esp. local airlines (since mid-2023) is now modified and TBC.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC - *N/A*

4. Challenges

Describe the response to challenges, if any, listed in the 2022 report

- LSC group improved efficiency of the visa appointments IT systems, streamlined the visa process in general, managed negative publicity, worked on prevention of documents' fraud.

Describe subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2024) – N/A

5. Other issues - *N/A*

All represented Schengen MSs' Embassies were informed about this report and approved it.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in UGANDA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

10 Member States (8 embassies and 2 at other diplomatic representation level) are present and another 13 are formally represented in Uganda.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

LSC met once every trimester, often in a joint configuration with LCC, often well attended (90% of MS).

A dedicated LSC meeting to discuss visa was organised in December at the request of 1 MS; only 3 member states were present.

All meetings are shared by the HOPPI of EUDEL.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

MS are well equipped and prepared, although in several embassies the person in charge of consular affairs is also covering one or other tasks for the embassy (political counsellor, economic counsellor, head of administration).

DE, FR and IT are the most solicited consular posts with over 3 months waiting period during peak seasons. This can create some visa shopping to secondary consular posts. The group has tried to address the topic and shared lessons learns from most “efficient” consular posts.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents For the locations where work on this <u>has not</u> been completed

MS present consider that harmonisation of practices is already acquired, at least the issue is rarely raised.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

The topic has been discussed during LSC meeting and MS are also expecting the new policy for online application for regular travellers to the Schengen area to ease some of the locally managed requests backlogs.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

MS are sharing lessons learned notably regarding handling of visa fees.

3.5 Exchange of information

During the LSC meeting MS shared information openly with the view to harmonise their procedures and develop common position to address issues with the authorities.

Cases of fraud are frequent (forget documents, forged Note Verbal for civil servants). This is a regularly discussed topic, also with likeminded. A demarche was carried to the ministry of foreign affairs in 2023 on the matter. MS also exchange best practices in dealing with local administration and bank institutions to verify documents.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Briefly describe such initiatives (background-results achieved).

4. Challenges

The main challenge is the limited capacity of the delegation to manage consular matters, priorities being given to LCC.

5. Other issues

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in the UNITED KINGDOM 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

During 2023, the Local Schengen Cooperation in the United Kingdom/ UK has remained unchanged compared to the previous reporting period, as all 27 EU-MS and associated states (NO, IS, CH) remain present in the UK, with visa processing services available in London or at consular offices in territory. There are 10 EU-MS (DE, IE, ES, FR, HR, IT, HU, PL, PT, RO) represented though Consulates General or Career Consular Offices outside of London in the four constituent countries of the UK (Belfast/ Northern Ireland, Edinburgh/ Scotland, Cardiff/ Wales, Manchester/England). NO, CH, IS are present only in London.

Several Schengen MS also collaborate with external service providers (ESPs), including VFS Global, TLS, etc., for the purpose of the collection of visa applications. In addition to the aforementioned locations where MS are physically present, other MS are represented though external service providers in the same locations, as well as in Birmingham.

The LSC meetings continue to be extended to the Member States career Consulates outside London, via WebEx, allowing for sustained hybrid collaboration and information sharing.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Under EU DEL's coordination, the LSC group met four times in 2023 (once per quarter), with meetings held in a hybrid format which permitted attendance of MS from across the UK, with an emphasis on in-person attendance of MS in London.

The meetings continued to be chaired by EUDEL and were well attended, with an average attendance of 72% for the year. The lowest attendance recorded was 25% for one MS, followed by 50% (5 MS who attended half the LSC meetings). A majority of MS had good attendance rates (75-100%). EUDEL has taken steps, especially through Q3-4 to encourage attendance of 75% and above from all MS by encouraging more input and ownership of the agenda setting from the group, further facilitating discussions with DG HOME and having regular written exchanges and communications on topics of interest in between LSC meetings.

EU DEL has continued to ensure all Schengen MS are represented in our correspondence lists, incl. representatives from consular/ visa offices outside of London, by enabling the aforementioned hybrid participation. To support representation and information sharing, regular updates to the correspondence list are ensured at EUDEL level, whilst meeting summaries, consultations and guidance materials are distributed to the group as necessary. EUDEL continued to support the LSC network by compiling draft reports that are submitted for comments to the group. The exception on data collections centralised by EUDEL remains the collection of visa statistics, which is ensured yearly, as customary (through agreement in the group) by one MS.
Reports of the meetings are drawn up by EU DEL, in consultation with MS if needed.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

There have been no major challenges pertaining to the implementation of the Visa Code reported in the LSC group. Member States have continued to exchange throughout the year, both in writing and in person meetings, good practices and compare notes on the best ways to utilise resources when confronted with limited capacity for processing visas. The group also continued to monitor the phenomenon of visa scalping for profit by third party intermediaries throughout the year. To tackle the latter, some MS have introduced various measures, including new booking systems that do not allow changing details of applicants and requiring upfront payments to discourage 'dummy' requests.

A recurring point requiring clarifications that carried over from the previous reporting period is the use of digital biometric residence permits (BRPs) given the fact that the UK's new immigration system is moving towards an all-digital system. The London LSC has expressed a desire to understand whether written provisions can be included/ added in Schengen Guidance/ Harmonised Lists of supporting documents regarding digital immigration status documents.

A new point of debate (compared to the previous reporting period) raised by several MS throughout the year has been on the proof required to establish that a visa applicant is travelling with or to meet an EU national family member. The UK's exit from the EU has generated an additional strand of work for visa sections in the UK through the growing demand for Schengen visas for non-UK third-country family members who are resident in the UK, and classify as 'visa-required' nationals. This is due to the fact that 'visa-required' nationals, who previously held a UK residence card of a family member of a Union citizen, are no longer able to use the cards following Brexit and are now starting to travel more regularly with their EU family member, under the new travel conditions.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

As in the previous reporting period, the group's meetings in 2023 have unfolded completely post-adoption of the harmonised list of documents.

As noted above, the issue of accepting the increasing UK's digital-only proof of immigration status going forward is a concern that has been carried over from 2022 and which, in the absence of a written mention in Schengen practical guidance or harmonised lists, continues to generate concerns among MS. The group would like to explore the possibility of an amendment of the harmonised list of documents to include developments in local immigration practices, such as mention/ addition in the list of virtual immigration statuses, share-codes to verify the status as per UK (future) practice.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

EUDEL continued to reiterate, where necessary, the benefits of issuing MEVs with a progressively longer validity to frequent bona fide travellers, underlining that this is mutually beneficial for applicants and for consular services, reducing over time the volume of applications.

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The figures for 2023 compared to 2022 continued to reflect an overall steady output of MEVs. However, at the time of writing this report the data collection for 2023 has not been finalised by MS for Q4 and a direct comparison is not possible. The existent data however indicates the number of MEVs is likely to be close to, or to surpass, last year's (almost 200k). However, compared to the demand in 2023, only around half of the visas issued seem to be MEVs. This could be a direct effect of the fact that the number of visas applied for has surpassed, even in the absence of Q4 data, the overall numbers for 2022 (320k visa requests in Q1-3 alone, an increase of 20% compared to the entire number of such requests in 2022).

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

In its coordinating position, EUDEL actively encourages updates across LSC members on travelling trends, visa shopping counteractions, ESP performance indicators etc, that can help mitigate common concerns and booking shortages.

3.5 Exchange of information

Member States continued to exchange information on various operational subjects. In 2023, the focus was on capacity issues due to the continued trend of unprecedented levels of global travel/ tourism and record visa applications.

EU DEL continued to ensure, with DG HOME support, that the group was provided with regular updates and relevant information from the Visa Working Party and other EU-level fora. Within the LSC, there remains a good collaboration in the gathering and sharing of data on visa issuance, with regular statistics being collected by a member of the group. The LSC continued to ensure data collections throughout Q1-4, normally through a yearly rotation by a MS so as to ensure a fair burden sharing of tasks (Sweden, who coordinated the data collection in 2022, is doing so again for this year).

Although there have not been reported cases of visa fraud in the LSC format, the recurring challenge throughout the year has been the increasing numbers of visa shopping applicants as well as visa appointment 'scalping'.

More attention has been given to ESPs and MS have joined together where sharing the same ESP to explore ways to mitigate capacity issues as well as strategies to tackle the above issues.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

To understand emerging trends following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, such as the increasing necessity for EU family member visas and transit visas, the EU Delegation and a Working Group of MS, pulled together a consular note on the consequences of Brexit over consular services that demonstrates, based on the data the fact provided by MS, that also for visa services (as well as for other consular services being provided by embassies/consulates in the UK), MS have – as a result of the exceptional pressures created by the impact of Brexit – reached and in some cases exceeded their capacity, negatively impacting the celerity of service provision. The note will be soon adopted by HoMs.

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This scoping exercise on capacity issues has been carried out to protect the right of visa and consular services applicants and facilitate EU-UK mobility by proving the necessity for upscaling and reinforcing at the UK level human and administrative capabilities in MS visa and consular departments.

4. Challenges

Describe the response to challenges, if any.

Compared to the previous reporting period, which saw MS confronting RU nationals/ applicants with the consequences of the war of aggression in UA by RU, there have been no further developments in 2023 as MS have carefully coordinated with their HQs and missions to the EU in structuring and adapting their response to the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement.
Describe subjects to be addressed within the next reporting period (2024).

Based on the continued exchanges w/ Schengen MS, the most common topic of concern remains the shortages of visa processing capacity exacerbated by the 'visa shopping' phenomenon (applicants who apply for a visa to consulate A when they in reality wish to spend most of their Schengen stay in State B).

Additionally, as noted above, and in the previous reporting period, MS are seeing a drastic increase in applications for transit and family member visas. The latter are being monitored carefully by MS, as they are trying to coordinate locally on the best practices to streamline applications as per the Visa Code rights of these applicants as well as to determine the best set of documentation necessary to prove the applicant is travelling with or to meet an EU family member.

Final Note: This content of this report has been consulted with Member States locally before being finalised.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

All EU Member States are present in Washington, D.C., as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland (Schengen Associated Countries). Since U.S. citizens do not need visas for short stays in the Schengen area, the issuance of Schengen visas is generally limited to third-country nationals legally staying in the US.

For the purpose of LSC in Washington D.C., Denmark, Estonia and Finland are represented by their consular posts in other locations in the US (e.g. New York City, San Francisco). Liechtenstein is represented by Switzerland for LSC purposes. Some consulates (e.g. Luxembourg) issue visas for third-country nationals residing outside the U.S. due to non-representation in certain countries. Some consulates centralise the issuance of visas outside of Washington D.C. (e.g. Lithuania issues all Schengen visas in Chicago). Consulates of some Member States represent other Member States for visa issuance purposes (e.g. Lithuanian General Consulate in Chicago issues Schengen visas for Switzerland, Consulate General of Austria in Los Angeles issues Schengen visas for Slovakia for applicants residing in some U.S. states).

So far, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany (with exception of the German Consulate General in Atlanta), Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden are using external service providers in the U.S.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

One LSC meeting was held in December 2023 in hybrid format with participation from consulates across the U.S. (New York, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, as well as from consulates/embassies in Washington DC). This meeting was very well attended both on the side of the EU Member States and from the Schengen Associated Countries. The EU Delegation chaired the meeting and drew up the report.

There is no systematic coordination of the Schengen cooperation outside of Washington D.C. but a new practice was put in place during the pandemic with remote participation of Member States' representatives from other U.S. locations (New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles and San Francisco). As this proved very popular among the LSC participants, this practice continued in 2023.

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3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The volume of visa applications returned to pre-pandemic levels for most LSC participants, in some cases even far surpassing those. Waiting times for visa appointments at the different consulates are diverging, depending on factors such as the size of the consulate or the season, and ranging from one day to up to a few weeks, which might in certain cases lead to a "forum shopping" by applicants. An indication in this regard is the high rate of cancellations or non-attendance for appointments booked online. The introduction of a compulsory advance payment for the services requested had a positive impact on such behaviors. Schengen countries are also seeking to reduce waiting times by imposing to their service providers specific deadlines for fixing appointments. Finally, with the end of the touristic season, waiting times have improved as well.

Representatives of Schengen countries that are using an external service provider for the processing of visa applications continued to note a number of challenges, essentially linked to the high turnover of the service providers' employees and the quality of the service provided. However, the situation seems to improve in the long term notably as a consequence of regular reviews/inspections carried out by those countries. The creation of a task force and the pooling of resources by the Schengen countries concerned could thus be considered in order to ensure regular inspections and further service improvement while reducing the burden on the individual countries. Another issue flagged by participants concerned the divergence in the exchange rates applied by the different offices of the service providers. This could be addressed by harmonizing the frequency and the procedure to update exchange rates.

Among other issues raised in the LSC meeting, participants exchanged on the possibility of holders of U.S. B1/B2 visas to receive a Schengen visa under certain circumstances and provided that solid ties to the country of residence are proven and bona fide intentions are demonstrated. Some participants noted also a major decrease in Schengen visa applications by Russian nationals. Moreover, they reported also a rising rate of refusals for such visa applications. For some participants, visa applications from Belarusian citizens have increased.
The obligation to stamp and sign above the visa QR codes was recalled.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

LSC participants considered that, while the harmonization of practices regarding supporting documents requested for Schengen visa applications is generally already acquired, further discussions in this regard could be useful, notably to address certain specific cases such as the registration of itinerary details for minors traveling with one parent.

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3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

Regarding the issuance of multiple-entry Schengen visas, LSC participants indicated that they follow closely the Visa Code and the cascade rules set out therein. Certain Schengen countries have centralized the treatment of visa applications and this is ensuring a uniform treatment of all applications. However, a more generous treatment, going beyond the cascade rules provided for in the Visa Code, is given in exceptional cases (ex. business travel) – a harmonization of these cases could be considered in the long term. Participants indicated that more awareness raising on the cascade rules would be useful.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

See point 3.1.

3.5 Exchange of information

The December 2023 LSC meeting permitted to exchange on trends observed and pointed to new developments: 1). more applications from individuals with asylum status in the U.S. trying to travel to the EU, and 2). more individuals with Schengen/EU asylum status attempting to obtain a visa to return to the Schengen area, possibly after a disappointing time in the U.S. following, in some cases, irregular migration to the latter notably via the Southwest border. This involves nationals from Iraq, Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Cameroon. LSC participants pointed also to cases where fraudulent or stolen Schengen documents were used during Schengen visa applications.

LSC participants considered that the promotion of the use of VIS Mail could also be useful to increase coordination and information exchange.

The possibility of visa shopping and cooperation with external service providers were also raised (see point 3.1).

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

N/A

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4. Challenges

See point 3.

5. Other issues

EUDEL gave an update on the state of play of the EES and ETIAS systems; participants pointed to the need for a substantial effort in outreach and awareness raising on the implications and scope of these systems.

LSC participants exchanged on the U.S. Enhanced Border Security Partnership (EBSP) initiative and on the U.S. request for the introduction of airport transit visas for certain third country nationals.

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in UZBEKISTAN
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

Eleven Member States are present in Tashkent, 10 of them have consular officials and issue Schengen and national visas. Eight are represented from Moscow, five are represented from Astana, and three Member States (Austria, Finland and Sweden) are represented from their respective capitals Vienna, Helsinki and Stockholm. Austria conducts visa services from its Embassy in Baku using an external service provider in Uzbekistan, Finland operate visa matters from its Embassy in Astana. Lithuania operates visa matters by its Consulate General in Almaty. Spain has Charge d'Affaires a.i. in Tashkent, but consular officials are operating from Moscow. In terms of Schengen visa issuance, France represents Belgium, Iceland, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and Portugal, Germany represents Sweden and Austria (for diplomatic passport holders only), Hungary represents Denmark, Italy represents Malta, Norway and Slovenia, Latvia represents Estonia and Switzerland.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

Four LSC meetings were held in 2023 in February, May, September and December. The meeting in February could be considered as an *ad hoc* meeting as it was attended by the US consular officials and was devoted only to one topic: illegal migration to the US through EU airports and Mexico. The meetings were well attended, about 2/3 of MS present in Tashkent usually attended the meetings. Bulgaria and Romania also attended the LSC meetings. Meetings were chaired by the Head of Political, Press and Information section of the EU Delegation. Reports were drafted by the EU Delegation. There are no consular institutions with visa issuance outside Tashkent. The European Return Liaison Officer deployed to Uzbekistan (covering also Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) began to regularly attend LSC meetings.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

There is a high amount of applications supported by the Note Verbale which are submitted at the last moment without due respect to procedures and the timing necessary for the processing of visa applications. This sometimes put heavy burden for consular officials. Request of visas though a Note Verbale was on the rise and not all persons included in the requests were related to the public service.

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LSC also exchanged views on the functioning of the visa centres and the waiting time for an appointment. In spring and summer time the waiting time for some MS was two months, there were even difficulties to get online registration. Discussions took place regarding the abuse by some travel agencies of the electronic registration systems by blocking of registration spots which lead to difficulties by *bona fide* travellers to register for the submission of documents.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

For the locations where work on this has been completed:

The harmonised list of supporting has been agreed by the LSC in 2014 and approved by the Commission on 4 September 2014 by its decision C(2014) 6141. LSC discussed the need to update the lists in 2022, but finally it was decided that the revision was not needed at this stage. LSC expressed overall satisfaction with the functioning of the harmonised list. MS confirmed their adherence to the provisions of the said Commission decision.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

For the locations where a specific cascade has not been adopted:

LSC did not discuss the issuance of MEV cascades in 2023. The previous opinion adopted by the LSC in 2022 remains valid according to which LSC is in favour of the application of the provisions of the Visa Code for the issuance of multiple entry visas.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

There were no other substantial initiatives taken to ensure harmonisation of practices, except exchange of views within the LSC on various issues related to Schengen visa issuance.

3.5 Exchange of information

Exchange of information among within the LSC was regular and smooth. MS often consult among themselves on various issues related to visa issuance by e-mail or through Telegram group. The exchange of information related to individual cases is done on Vismail and cooperation among Member States to this end is also good. During LSC meetings issues of cooperation with external service providers were discussed in detail. LSC exchanged views on the proposal by the authorities of the host country to use the services of a Government institution in assisting the processing of visa applications and was in favour to decline the proposal. The improvement of presentation of quarterly visa statistics will be discussed at the next LSC meeting in 2024.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

At the initiative of the US Embassy the LSC attended the anti-fraud training at the US Embassy on 26 April. It was useful in order to familiarise with the typical symptoms of fraudulent documents and the scope of fraud in the country. The EU Delegation also established a joint EU MS - US Embassy consular Telegram Group.

4. Challenges

One of the challenges in 2023 were requests for double entry Schengen visas for cruise line participants. Such application significantly decreased in 2023.

Besides general exchange on practice, LSC will further discuss waiting times, cooperation with external servie providers, cases of fraud which are specific in the country of residence as well as interaction with tourist agences. The LSC will continue engagement with the US Embassy, in particular on combating fraud.

5. Other issues

In 2023 the LSC also discussed challenges related to readmission. The LSC Chair briefed LSC on the outreach carried out by the EU Delegation with the host Government on this subject. LSC members were also invited to the meeting with the State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice of Sweden to discuss readmission. The LSC took note of the Briefing by the European Return Liaison Officer deployed to Uzbekistan on the same matter. The LSC briefly exchanged views on the proposal by Uzbekistan to start the dialogue on visa facilitation. In 2023 the LSC mainly discussed the growing illegal migration though the EU airports towards Mexico and the US onwards and the introduction of airport transit visas for the citizens of Uzbekistan (already introduced by Spain and France).

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO VIETNAM

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in VIETNAM
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

18 EU Member States, together with Switzerland and Norway, are represented in Hanoi.

DE, FR, HU, IT and NL have Consul Generals in Ho Chi Minh city. 10 MS have Honorary Consuls (HC) in HCMC (AT, CY, CZ, EE, FI, EL, LT, MT, RO, SK), 2 MS have HC in Hanoi (LV, LT), 1 MS has HC in Haiphong (CZ) and 1 MS in Danang (ES).

Several member states have engaged with private companies (Visa Facilitation Services - VFS) to handle the receipt of visa applications, including recording biometric data.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

1) In 2023, EUDEL held 4 regular, scheduled meetings. The LSC meetings were chaired by EUDEL in 2023. Reporting has been done by EUDEL.

2) All meetings have been very well attended and the level of coordination is generally excellent (exchange of information, sharing experience about VFS, joint outreach to VN authorities etc).

3) Consuls residing outside of Hanoi are always invited to join by video link but tend not to join. In November 2023, there was a HoMs meeting in HCMC where a presentation was given by Mimi Vu on the topic of illegal migration. Some of the Consuls attended. Follow-up action by the LSC is currently considered.

4) The process of updating the crisis preparedness is underway and will be finalised by mid-March 2024.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

The Visa Code is strictly applied.

No specific problem relating to the implementation of the Visa Code was brought to the attention of the group.

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3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

For the locations where work on this <u>has not</u> been completed

The Harmonised List was reviewed in 2022. The LSC group is informed that the approved list is mandatory and must be advertised on the MS embassies' websites. It has been implemented and no particular issue has been raised.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS have adapted to the general rules for issuing MEV.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No particular problems were flagged.

In May, the group agreed to initiate a request to update the harmonised list of reference on the following points:

- Replace "household registration book" (family book) by "confirmation of residence" issued by the police department.
- Introduce (or confirm if there are) photo requirements for the visa (validity period of 6 months, no edition or post-processing of the photo, white background etc.). EUDEL will confirm with HQ if such requirements/best practices already exist.
- Enlarge the type of document accepted to prove family relation (marriage certificate being "too restrictive"). EUDEL will see with HQ what type of "family relation / relative" is usually accepted for the application.

3.5 Exchange of information

Throughout the year, MS have been sharing information about passports and national IDs sold illegally in Vietnam. In February, one MS has noted an increase of passport theft in Ho Chi Minh City. Other members of the group confirmed the trend at the time, but the topic has not been raised since.

Throughout the year, MS have been sharing experience with cases of fake documents or genuine documents with fake information (diplomas, birth certificates). Several members confirmed that because of this widespread problem they do not (or rarely) legalise documents anymore. Some Member States confirmed that they sometimes hire legal experts to verify the information and documents provided by the applicants; the process is however time consuming and very expensive.

MS exchanged information on suspicious travel agencies.

MS shared migration and visa numbers.

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3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

Further to a presentation on the topic of illegal migration delivered for HoMs in November 2023, the group has been discussing additional action (e.g., establishing a permanent taskforce; writing a short paper and presenting it to HoMs). This was raised at the first LSC meeting of 2024 and is now being discussed by MS.

4. Challenges

No challenges were described in the 2022 report. This year, LSC will focus on action to address illegal migration.

5. Other issues

Present any other subject of relevance to the LSC.

	Visa C submitted	Visa C refused	Visa D submitted	Visa D refused
AT	1.865	176	318	1
BE	1.741	146	428	28
BG	407	8	255	6
CZ	2.893	416	2.365	79
DE	17.908	1.681	7.302	547
DK	2.154	248	1.247	19
FI	1.432	272	Residence permits 2.310 (D-visas 194)	n/a
FR	37.335	5.950	3.873	819
EL	1.335	80	134	6
HU	1.282	346	n/a	n/a
IT	10.190	186	616	14
NL	4.641	571	873	2
PL	648	36	2.736	283
RO	346	7	1.762	323
SK	140	12	745	76
ES	4.035	223	284	24
SE	2.471	219	n/a	n/a
MT	No information	No information	759	211
NO	No information	No information	No information	No information
CH	No information	No information	No information	No information

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EUROPEAN UNION
DELEGATION TO ZAMBIA

LOCAL SCHENGEN COOPERATION (LSC) in ZAMBIA
2023 REPORT

1. Introduction

7 EU MS (FR, DE, IT, CZ, SE, FI, IE) are resident in Lusaka. Only DE, IT and CZ issue Schengen visas locally. SE issues visas through its regional hub in Nairobi using an external service provider. Other MS are accredited from Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi and Pretoria. There are no EU consulates in other Zambian cities.

2. LSC meetings held in 2023

There were two well-attended LSC meetings in 2023. The EU Delegation hosted the last LSC meeting in February 2024. The las meeting was hybrid to ensure coordination with non-resident MS. The next LSC meeting will take place in April 2024.

3. State of play

3.1 Application of the Visa Code

Several MS reported "visa shopping" issues. Visa shopping seems to have increased due to the fact that only 3 MS issue visas locally and their timelines are different. Applicants reportedly approach MS that do not issue visas locally and, once informed of the need to refer to the local outsourcing office (which entails a significant additional processing cost), proceed to change their planning. This tactic is seen in tourism visa applications as well as business and official visas.

3.2 Assessment of the need to harmonise the lists of supporting documents

The harmonised list of documents has been completed and is being implemented by EU MS in Lusaka. MS noted that the harmonised list is a living document that should be regularly updated.

One MS resident in Harare reported mismatches among the requirements established by MS with regard to, for example, marriage certificate requirements.

3.3 Assessment of the need to adapt the general rules on issuing multiple-entry visas for applicants under Article 24(2) of the Visa Code ('MEV cascades')

MS reported that the rule on issuing visas according to Art. 24(2) is being implemented in accordance to the guidelines.

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Another MS reported that no specific local cascade is in force for issuing visas with long validity period and multiple entries for Zambian citizens, but the issue is under consideration.

3.4 Harmonisation of practices

No other initiatives to report.

3.5 Exchange of information

Information is shared during LSC meetings on statistics, cases of fraud, cooperation with local authorities and the issue of external providers, among others.

3.6 Any other initiative taken in LSC

No other initiatives to report.

4. Challenges

Challenges have been experienced by some MS receiving last-minute high-level visa applications, which did not provide enough time for adequate processing. Discussions with the government have not resulted in visible improvements on this issue.

One MS reported extremely limited knowledge on the rules of the Visa Code by the majority of applicants.

5. Other issues

No other issues to report.

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