

Analysis of the Hungarian Visa System with regard to Moldova, Russia and Ukraine

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Attila Melegh, Sándor Illés, Tamás Molnár
Hungarian Europe Society, Budapest

I. Statistical data on the volume of movement across Hungary and on the numbers of visas issued with regard the countries concerned

I.1. General overview

The volume of movement across the Hungarian border has been growing since 2004. 36.1 million foreigners crossed the Hungarian border in 2004. The respective figures were 38.6 million in 2005, 41 million in 2006 and 42.5 million in 2007. We could state that the emerging trend was constant, but in relative terms the rate of growth diminished in the last year under investigation.

The official numbers of visas issued were as follows: 264 thousand in 2002, 425 thousand in 2003, 757 thousand in 2004, 695 thousand in 2005, 640 thousand in 2006 and 502 thousand in 2007. In 2008, the total number of issued short-term (Schengen) visas was 317,519. The “top three countries” where Hungary issues the highest numbers of visas are Serbia, Ukraine and Russia.

According to the time series depicted above, we can state that the number of visas issued had been growing until 2004. In that year the volume reached the peak. After that, a trend of slow decrease began. The recent decline may be due to several reasons: already

issued Schengen visas allow multiple entries (valid for one year or more); due to the principle of main destination visas are applied for in another country (transiting persons are lost); special cards for relatives have been introduced; the fee has been raised. From 2008 that declining trend has been accelerating due to the newly functioning Schengen visa system in Hungary.

As for Hungary, the rejection rate of “A”, “B”, and “C” types of visas (short-term visas) applied for at consulates in the world was 1.8% in 2007, while the rejection rate of “C” visas only applied for at consulates in the world was 1.9% in 2007. According to the data of the Office of Immigration and Naturalization¹, the rejection rate of “C” visas (requested at the border) was 40.5% and the rejection rate of “D” (long-term) visas was 6.3% in 2007. It was possible to compute the total rejection rate, too. The original data was provided by two authorities (consulates and the Office of Immigration and Naturalization). This overall value was 2.4% in 2007. According to those data in 2008, the rejection rate of “C” type visas applied for at consulates was 3.6%. The equivalent indicator in 2007 was only 2.7%.

It is to be noted that rejection rates varied highly with authorities in 2007. The consulates were more liberal than the Office of Immigration and Naturalization. In the light of the visa statistics for 2008, this phenomenon did not change.

The total rejection rate was not high in the international context: 2.4% in 2007. As stated above, increasing by 1.2%, the final indicator of the rejection rate was higher in 2008.

¹ The Office of Immigration and Naturalization carries out reviews for visas concerning a specific set of countries where central control is required (“5A consultation”). In these cases, beside the consul, the Office also plays a role. Additionally, the Office issues long-term visas (“D” visas) – except for visas for seasonal work.

We can presume with great probability that the growing rejection rates were a direct effect of the fully applicable Schengen system.

1.2. Ukraine

As regards foreigners crossing the border with visas, Ukraine takes the second position following Serbia. In 2004 2.5 million, in 2005 2.4 million, in 2006 1.9 million and in 2007 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens were recorded who moved to Hungary according to the database of Hungarian Central Statistical Office. The decrease was the opposite of the general trend. Ukraine was the only country out of the ten biggest sending countries where a decrease was noted.

Regarding visas, based on the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2007, the consulates issued 2 “A” visas, 20,868 “B” visas, 145,282 “C” visas and 5,009 “D” visas in Ukraine. The rejection rate was 1.7% in the cases of A+B+C visas. There was no information on the number of applicants for “D” visas, therefore we could not compute the rejection rate of „D“ visas and the total rejection rate. Out of the 171,161 visas issued altogether, the consulate in Beregovo issued 42,919 visas, the consulate in Uzhgorod 61,271 visas and the consulate in Kiev 66,971 visas. The rejection rate of A+B+C visas was 2.1% in Beregovo, 2.6% in Uzhgorod and 0.6% in Kiev. In 2008, compared to the figures of 2007, there was a significant decrease regarding all types of visas: no “A” visas were issued, and the other numbers were: 10,443 “B” visas, 75,920 “C” visas and 4,157 “D” visas. The combined rejection rate was 2.5% in the cases of B+C+D visas.

From the Hungarian point of view, the neighbouring Ukraine with the greatest volumes had central position from all the countries of interest. The consulates in Beregovo and Uzhgorod are situated in the Carpathian region

(Zakarpattia Oblast) near to the newly created Schengen external border. Beregovo and Uzhgorod function as centres of the Hungarian minority living in Ukraine. The consulates of Beregovo and Uzhgorod issued approximately 61% out of all visas. People belonging to the Hungarian minority need visas, but they can apply for a local border traffic permit (with a maximum 5 years of validity) or for a “national visa” (with validity between 1 and 5 years). It provided the great example of distance dependency phenomenon when compared to the capital Kiev.

The rejection rate of A+B+C types of visas in Ukraine was 1.7%. This indicator was smaller than the general rate (1.8%) in 2007. It is a little bit unusual that the rejection rate of Beregovo was more than three times higher and the rejection rate of Uzhgorod was more than four times higher compared to the rejection rate of Kiev. The rejection rate was slightly higher in 2008 (2.5%), which may be explained by our full Schengen accession.

1.3. Russia

The citizens of Russia have been crossing the Hungarian border less frequently in the European context. In 2004, 92.6 thousand Russians travelled to Hungary. This volume decreased by the next year (91 thousand people), then the increase started with high growth rates (in 2006 – 108.1 thousand, in 2007 – 134.6 thousand). The Russian rate of visa/traffic (the number of visas issued divided by traffic movements) was the highest within the countries of interest, with the rate of 0.45 in 2007.

As for the visas, based on the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2007 the consulates issued no “A” visas, 4,582 “B” visas, 55,228 “C” visas and 411 “D” visas in Russia. The rejection rate was only 0.22% in the cases on A+B+C types of visas. There was no information on

the number of applicants for “D” visas, so we were unable to compute the rejection rate of “D” visas and the total rejection rate. Out of the 60,221 visas issued altogether, the consulate in Moscow issued 46,559 visas, the consulate in St. Petersburg 13,651 visas and the consulate in Yekaterinburg 11 visas. The rejection rate of A+B+C visas was 0.29 in Moscow and almost zero (0.04%) in St. Petersburg; there was no rejection in Yekaterinburg (the latter had not yet opened by that time). In 2008, compared to the figures of 2007, there was a slight decrease regarding all types of visas: 2,327 “B” visas, 54,811 “C” visas and 437 “D” visas were issued. The combined rejection rate was almost zero (0.3%) in the case of B+C+D types of visas together.

In the quantitative row, Russia occupied the second place with very low rejection rates (eight times smaller than the global average). The consulate in Yekaterinburg may have a high potential if Hungarian migration policy starts to attract new migrants from Siberia. There is no official policy to attract migrants from that region and it would be a great surprise if that happened. In addition, Siberia actually attracts visitors from China or from the Central Asian republics.

1.4. Moldova

The absolute numbers and the general tendency of citizens of Moldova were very similar to the Russian situation described above. In 2004, 103 thousand Moldavians travelled to Hungary. This volume decreased significantly by the next year (88.3 thousand people), and then a slow increase started (in 2006 – 90.5 thousand). After that, an extremely intensive increase started. The highest growth rates produced 127.4 thousand travellers. It can be stated that the temporal oscillation concerning the citizens of Moldova was the highest among the countries under investigation.

Based on the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2007 the consulate in Chisinau issued no “A” visas, 121 “B” visas, 1,088 “C” visas and 92 “D” visas. The rejection rate was 11.4% in the case on A+B+C types of visas. There was no information on the number of applicants for “D” visas, so we were unable to compute the rejection rate of “D” visas and the total rejection rate. In 2008, compared to the figures of 2007, there was a strong increase regarding all types of visas: 297 “B” visas, 7185 “C” visas and 168 “D” visas were issued. The combined rejection rate was the highest among the four countries concerned: 7.4% in the case of B+C+D types of visas together.

The data presented above show that the rejection rate was extremely high; more than six times higher than the global average. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that the citizens of Moldova were the fourth among foreigners expelled from Hungary and they took the second place in absolute terms among foreign citizens in detention, as shown in the figures of the Office of Immigration and Naturalization from 2003 until 2007. The local social situation (no stable workplaces etc.) might also be the source of difficulties.

I.5. Belarus

Hungary was out of the scope of travellers of Belarus. The absolute numbers were very small. In 2004, only 17 thousand citizens of Belarus entered Hungary. The trend was parallel to the general one: a continuous increase was observed (in 2005 – 18.8 thousand, in 2006 – 24.3 thousand, in 2007 – 26.6 thousand).

II. Analysis of the network of consulates: How does Hungary position itself globally?

Looking at the global network of Hungarian consulates, some of the main elements of the Hungarian global self-positioning may be deciphered. On the basis of interviews, the key point with regard to the Hungarian consular network is that it shows Hungary as a small country. It is supposed to fully cooperate with European partners, mainly with major European immigrant countries, and it considers any kind of Hungarian specificity only with regard to Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries and the Hungarian diaspora around the world. In other words, Hungary has no real strategy with regard to other parts of the world; neither does it possess a global migration strategy. It truly aims at facilitating “European” perspectives, not only in technical sense.

For the time being, Hungary has 112 consulates in 84 countries. In Europe, the system is well-developed, basically covering all countries and maintaining more than one consulate in some of them, including Serbia (Subotica since 2001 and Belgrade) and Ukraine (Beregovo since 2007; Uzhgorod since 1991; and Kiev); the latter are countries with substantial Hungarian minorities that cover the majority out of third-country nationals visiting Hungary. As regards Ukraine, there is also a special local border traffic agreement, which makes the positioning of consulates close to the border very important. Russia also has three consulates (Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg) necessitated by the huge geographical distances. This is all the more needed as the number of visitors has increased rather dramatically. Up to the recent opening of the consulate in Yekaterinburg, Moscow and St. Petersburg (the latter opened in 1978) were used by post-soviet Caucasian

republics including Georgia and Armenia. The Hungarian government very recently opened a consulate in Georgia, too, which might fill a major gap in the Caucasus. This move by Hungary might also reflect its adaptation to geopolitical changes as this opening was announced immediately after the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. In Azerbaijan there is only an embassy (since 2009), as consular affairs are still performed in Ankara (in Turkey, Hungary has another consulate in Istanbul).

With regard to the “Eastern European” region, it is noteworthy that in Chisinau (Moldova) the Hungarian embassy established in April 2007 a Common Visa Application Centre (CAC) where Hungary issues visas on behalf of Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, Slovenia and Germany (Luxemburg will shortly join, and other EU Member States are also interested). The legal basis of the so-called “visa-representation” can be found in the Common Consular Instructions. This has also been considered by our interviewees as a major example of fruitful cooperation and in this case Hungary is assessed favourably. It is also to be noted that Hungary has recently established a CAC in Istanbul like the one in Chisinau (representing Austria and Slovenia). Additionally, it has opened an embassy in Pristine, Kosovo. These steps can be regarded as extra clear signs of increased activity towards external Eastern European territories and also towards South Eastern Europe.

Other parts of Asia are covered with varying degrees of intensity: while the Middle East and some parts of Central Asia are rather well represented, other areas like South and South East Asia are not as well covered, especially if we take into account that only a few Asian countries enjoy visa-free status (these are: Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, Israel and Hong Kong). Basically, it may be stated that Hungary

covers the Mediterranean region somewhat extended to the east towards Central Asia. This also means that Africa, too, is divided into two parts: North Africa at the Mediterranean Sea is completely integrated, while moving to the South there are fewer and fewer consulates. Regardless of the somewhat increasing number of visitors from this region, only Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria have consulates. This area seems to be characterised by the most apparent lack of consulates; it is also described in the interviews (together with North Africa) as one of the most challenging areas in terms of refusals and problematic cases. Nigeria and Algeria are mentioned as real trouble spots. African countries appear most frequently on the list of the most sensitive persons, in whose case even airport transfer visas are required within the Schengen zone. It is worth noting that one of our interviewees stressed heavily that as Hungary is represented by some older Member States (like France), “it serves Hungarian security concerns”.

South America is also not widely covered either but there are a lot of countries (e.g. Chile, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil) whose citizens have enjoyed visa-free movement within the European Union since 2001 and therefore do not cause major problems. Nonetheless, it has to be added that these visa-free countries are the ones which have consulates and, therefore, exactly those citizens suffer who are under the visa requirement and placed on blacklists. Peru and Columbia, for instance, are such countries which have had Hungarian embassies and consulates so far. This also shows that Latin America is a major loophole in some respects. Our interviewees at the Consular Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also argue that Hungary fully participates in consular representation agreements and in this way visa/consular problems can be solved (with regard to seven EU Member States). However, this is unequal, too,

as Hungary gives more visas to other members, while there is only limited reciprocity. In addition, there is some “wait and see” policy on the side of older Member States. This reaction clearly fits into the unequal “European” approach as described above.

III. The background: Past approaches and institutional heritage

As already indicated above, Hungary has gone through a restriction stage in terms of visa policy due to joining the Schengen zone in two rounds. First after our EU-accession on 1 May 2004, when most of the basic requirements like the use of EU negative lists were set out in the visa regulation (539/2001/EC), and second after 21 December 2007 when Hungary fully joined the Schengen zone. The most important change is that in two neighbouring countries, Ukraine and Serbia, there had been no visa requirement (until the end of 2003), then there were free visas until our full Schengen membership. But after 21 December 2007, Hungary had to introduce visas with visa fees according to the Community level visa facilitation agreements (35 EUR) for those two countries that provide the greatest number of visitors and which have substantial Hungarian minorities. This (as also stressed by our interviewees) had a major impact on Hungarian visa policy and consular networks. As for Russia, there was no visa requirement for Russians until the end of the 1990s, when a very expensive visa was introduced (100 USD), which was later normalized a bit. Now the fee is 35 EUR, fixed by the EC-Russia visa facilitation agreement. For Belarusians, visas were introduced in 2001 (the visa fee is the regular 60 EUR for them); since then, only the holders of diplomatic or service passports have been allowed to travel without visas.

The special focus on the Hungarian minorities was a major political concern before joining the European Union and especially the Schengen zone. Between 1998 and 2002, the Hungarian government made significant attempts to “take out” the Hungarian minority from the range of possible outsider groups. These actions were guided by the idea to create a legal link with descendants of once Hungarian citizens living in neighbouring countries, in order to provide them with special status in the forthcoming changes. This caused a major public debate in the press that allowed political actors to develop different perspectives in Hungarian foreign policy. The debate was basically between two viewpoints: those who argued that these solutions were vital for maintaining some national unity across the borders and promoted the cultural and economic exchange between the different Hungarian groups, and those who regarded the idea as irresponsible (allowing millions of “Romanians” into Hungary) and some kind of irrational anti-Europeanism. An international debate ensued, too – with the involvement of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe – in which Hungary was warned that if kept in an ethnic framework, this approach of providing special status and related privileges had discriminatory elements. Hungary therefore lost a major battle in providing special status to the group in the primary focus of its foreign and visa policy.

This line of trying to provide a special status was continued in another campaign led by a non-governmental organization (the World Society of Hungarians) to hold a referendum (5 December 2004) on granting double citizenship to descendants of Hungarian citizens before the Paris Peace Treaty signed after the Second World War (in 1947). This also failed as the referendum was not valid due to low turnout. Nonetheless, it definitely contextualized the Hungarian visa policy as indicated by our consular interviewees. The accession of

Romania to the EU in 2007 eased somewhat the pressure on Hungarian politicians, but Ukraine and Serbia remained a major problem for the second round of joining the Schengen zone in December 2007.

This struggle to compensate the negative effects of Schengen rules led to a special sensitivity towards the fate of Hungarian minorities living in Ukraine and Serbia. Their problem was solved by resorting to different means. First, these countries benefit from the special reduced visa fee of 35 EUR (instead of the regular 60 EUR) for Schengen visas, based on the Community-level visa facilitation agreements with Ukraine and Serbia. In addition, as described above, several consulates operate in the border region and a local border traffic agreement was even signed with Ukraine in 2007 (entered into force in January 2008), but not with Serbia. Our interviewees at the consular section praised these as major achievements to counterbalance some of the negative effects of changes related to Schengen. It was pointed out that this had led to issuing 39 thousand local border traffic permits which showed the popularity of this solution and represented more than half of the total number of the *titre de séjours*. According to our interviewees, in Serbia it was actually the Hungarian minority representatives that rejected this form as they did not want to ease the pressure concerning a better solution, or – as pointed out in an interview – different minority groups in Serbia were unable to reach a consensus on the local border traffic agreement. In our interviews, we have also collected opinions that the Hungarian consulates are not so strict in the border region as compared to other areas like Kiev or the consulates in Russia. It has been clearly shown that if formal requirements are not seen as fully convincing, the fact of belonging to the Hungarian minority plays a positive role.

The effort to counterbalance the negative Schengen effects described above does not apply to other countries the treatment of which changed negatively during the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s. Related to the previously analyzed changes, some of the newly independent ex-Yugoslav republics (Bosnia, Macedonia) got on the list of obligatory visa countries due to the already mentioned EU visa regulation. Hungary has recently opened consulates in these countries to counterbalance some of the negative effects and to maintain a clear network towards the Balkans, an important focus of Hungarian foreign policy. Belarus has also been negatively affected by the Schengen changes.

It is also noteworthy that previously visa-free ex-Socialist countries had been included into the negative list even before Hungary joined the Schengen zone. Countries like China, Laos and Vietnam are major “producers” of increasing numbers of visitors and even migrants to Hungary (Chinese and Vietnamese mainly) and enjoyed visa-free status in the early 1990s. In qualitative interviews conducted in a cross-national study, this negative change is very well recorded in Chinese immigrants’ memory. The same holds true for Cuba, which up to its inclusion into the visa list had been sending groups of labour migrants to Hungary in the Socialist era. Now it is firmly on the negative list although it has a Hungarian consulate in Havana. In Latin America, Ecuador also suffered, especially as compared to the increasing number of Latin American countries that achieved visa-free status by the early 2000s. Among Asian countries, India lost some of its advantages and the free visa was first replaced by a relatively expensive Hungarian visa and then Schengen regulations introduced the 60 EUR fee.

To sum up, it may be concluded that outside the region of neighbouring countries Hungary has made no real efforts to counterbalance

the negative effects of visa requirements, and basically outside Europe it has rather firmly increased restrictions towards third country nationals, especially further away from Europe (there have been minor moves only, such as the introduction of some special advantages to business people in India etc.). Furthermore, Hungary has lost of its manoeuvring space; the third world countries which enjoyed some privileges when Hungarian visa was issued have basically lost these advantages. Before our full Schengen accession, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, visa fees towards some third countries were even higher than later when Schengen was introduced. Some experts saw this restrictive move as a sign of a more “conservative” approach by the Hungarian governments. Good examples were the visa fees toward Russia and India, which were relatively high before the Schengen norms were introduced.

IV. Specific travel facilitations: the Hungarian-Ukrainian local border traffic agreement

Based on the provisions of Regulation (EC) No. 1931/2006 on the rules of local border traffic (further referred to as the Regulation), Hungary started negotiations with Ukraine on local border traffic in June 2007. After two rounds of negotiations, the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Hungary and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the rules of local border traffic (further referred to as the Agreement) was signed on 18 September 2007 in Uzhgorod and was applied provisionally since 15 December 2007. It entered into force on 11 January 2008.

As it is the very first agreement negotiated by a Member State in accordance with the Regulation, Hungary’s efforts and practice with regards to the local border traffic regime have been considered as an example for the other

Member States (Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Lithuania), for the Commission and for the respective third countries (Ukraine, Belarus etc.).

As for the main provisions of the Agreement, its *ratione personae* scope covers persons having permanent residence in the border area for at least three years. Only such individuals can apply for the local border traffic permit (further referred to as the Permit). The Permit is valid for at least one year and not more than five years, but it cannot exceed the validity of the travel document. The fee for the Permit is 20 EUR, except for disabled persons, pensioners, children under the age of 18 and dependent children under the age of 21. The Permit entitles its holder to multiple entries and to a continuous stay of maximum three months within a six months period in the border area, in particular for social, cultural or family reasons, or substantiated economic reasons that are not to be considered as gainful activity according to national regulations. The Permit is to be issued within the shortest possible period of time, but not more than 30 days from the date of submitting the application.

Annexes to the Agreement contain a list of settlements in both the Hungarian and Ukrainian border regions (244 and 382 settlements respectively, including Nyíregyháza on the Hungarian side; on the Ukrainian side, it includes all Zakarpattia Oblast with Uzhgorod, Beregovo, Mankacevo to mention some bigger towns; the size of the border region is maximum 50 kilometres): the lists of documents required for proving permanent residence in the border area; the competent consular authorities who can receive applications and issue Permits (Hungarian Consulate General in Uzhgorod and Hungarian Consulate in Beregovo, and the Ukrainian Consulate General in Nyíregyháza) and the penalties that may be imposed by the Contracting States as determined by their national laws.

The authorized Hungarian Consulates in Ukraine (the General Consulate in Uzhgorod and the Consulate in Beregovo) have issued about 39,000 local border traffic permits since the date of application of the Agreement. The local border traffic regime has been operating smoothly and much to the satisfaction of both Contracting Parties for over one year.

The regime established by the Agreement has not caused any security risks in the Schengen zone. Neither the Hungarian Police nor the law enforcement authorities of other Schengen States have reported abuses regarding these permits. This situation is in large part due to the security-related provisions of the Agreement (i.e. at least three years permanent residence is required; the list of documents for proving permanent residence is determined; the Permit is only valid with passport; the penalties in case of abuses regarding the Permits are provided for). Furthermore, on the basis of other statistics on infractions pertaining to illegal migration and compared to the data collected on a monthly basis in 2007 there is a strong downward trend in 2008 concerning the use of false documents by Ukrainian nationals (approximately 30%).

The local border traffic regime concerns people on both the Hungarian and the Ukrainian sides of the border. The Agreement established tailor-made rules with respect to border crossing and staying in the border area which are suited to the local conditions and expectations of persons legally residing in the border region. Around 80% of the applicants for local border traffic permit possessed previously a Hungarian visa. Ukrainian citizens living in the border area have become acquainted with the possibilities of the local border traffic permit and they largely use it to ease their everyday lives. In sum, this regime has contributed to the further development of legal migration by creating a new instrument of facilitating the visa regime.

V. Some problematic points in visa issuing practice (methods of exclusion)

In Hungary we have conducted several interviews with people experiencing visa difficulties and this range of interviewees will increase in the near future. These background interviews and the ones conducted with civil servants at the Consular Department of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs allow us to present a preliminary picture about the methods of exclusion and areas to be monitored.

Our interviewees at Consular Department stressed that the comparative analysis of visa policy with regard to Hungary shows that the country's policy is not perceived as restrictive; moreover, they claim it got very few criticisms from Moldova, Ukraine as compared to some major European immigrant countries. It was also pointed out that Hungary has no problem of visa shopping meaning that it is not a weak point in the European visa system, which indirectly shows that from an administrative point of view Hungary maintains strict norms. Moreover, in one of the interviews it was positively raised that, for instance, in Algeria there is a very high rate of refusal (more than 63% as compared to the average of 3.7% in the first year after Schengen) and even there a reduced number of applicants is recorded. In this sense we can suggest that in some respects Hungary might aim at a more conservative position.

During the interviews conducted with some third country nationals (Russian, Ukrainian) we clearly got the hint that dubious visa applications are pushed back even before formal approval. This means that there are practices by the administrators sitting at the "window" refusing to take over the application and the relevant documents, trying to filter out

“problematic” visas in this way. This might be due to problematic documents or some other formal issues (like procedural deadlines applied very strictly as demonstrated by a Russian interviewee). Thus in some way they avoid the registration of applications that they refuse out of hand. This has been seen by interviewees of the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as ways of making the work smoother (the consul sits with the “window” persons time to time and thus monitors the procedure) or allowing applicants to avoid a negative stamp in their travel document. This might be major area of restrictive practices although, as stated above, Hungary has not been seen as too restrictive a country by the ad hoc committees of union members, the Commission and the concerned third country representatives.

The other major problem relates to the difficult access to Hungarian consular services, especially in Russia, where geographical distances lead to some major problems. First of all, our interviewees made it clear that taking care of such distances needs particular organization and also rather high travel costs including some days spent in Moscow or the relevant consulate cities. In this way applicants coming from distant areas of Russia or even outside Russia (as mentioned above, the Caucasus has been rather neglected up till very recently) have to rely on travel agencies which might claim as much money as 400–500 USD which is higher than the reduced Schengen visa fee used in the case of Russia (35 EUR). This may have negative social effects since such prices cannot be paid by people living far from the central regions of Russia.

VI. General recommendations

Statistics

1. All applications, including the ones not accepted for consideration, should be logged and included in the statistics.

Submitting visa applications

2. An option of appealing against the negative decisions should be included in the visa process (regulated ideally at the EU level).

3. An option of submitting visa documents electronically should be introduced (e.g. in Russia). E-applications would solve the problem of travel agencies, whose visa services are expensive and which often foster corruption.

4. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) should sign further bilateral agreements allowing consulates of other EU countries to issue Hungarian Schengen visas where there is no Hungarian consulate so that the applicants can avoid unnecessary travels to obtain a visa.

5. Visa fees should be lowered as much as possible.

Approach

6. The MFA should promote among its staff a positive attitude towards visa applicants.

7. The MFA should sponsor a comprehensive cost/benefit analysis of foreigners visiting Hungary, including those who do so with a visa.

8. The Visa Facilitation Agreements should be reviewed. These agreements better correspond to the situation of the old Member States, while for the Visegrad countries, which used to run less restrictive visa policies, they have not satisfactorily fulfilled their role.

9. Hungary should support initiatives leading to the simplification of the present Schengen visa regime vis-à-vis certain countries, espe-

cially the EU eastern neighbours. At the EU level, Hungary has already been supporting road maps to a visa-free regime for the Western Balkan countries.

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Our approach to the visa problem is not exclusively rights-driven. We believe, however, that Hungary (and the EU) should make itself ac-

cessible for visitors primarily for its own benefit. Visitors benefit the economy by spending their money here, open business opportunities and facilitate cultural flows. By making it easier for visitors to come, Hungary (and the EU) increases its soft power and promotes democratic values. An unnecessarily strict visa regime deprives the country of these opportunities.