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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

EIGHTH REPORT UNDER THE VISA SUSPENSION MECHANISM

{SWD(2025) 429 final}

8th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report

The 8th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report is based on Article 8 of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 (the ‘Visa Regulation’). Article 8(4) of the Regulation requires the Commission to ensure the monitoring of the continuous fulfilment of the visa exemption requirements by those countries whose nationals obtained visa-free access to the EU following the successful completion of a visa liberalisation dialogue. The report covers the year 2024 as well as major developments in 2025. It is accompanied by a Staff Working Document which details all the relevant aspects for the countries and regions covered by this report.

Visa liberalisation is an important part of the EU’s toolbox for cooperation on migration, security, and justice with third countries. It facilitates mobility and people-to-people contacts. It can boost travel and tourism and strengthens business, social and cultural ties between the EU citizens and the citizens of the benefitting third countries. It can also foster diplomatic relations and international cooperation. At the same time, the Commission’s monitoring of the EU’s visa-free regimes has shown that visa-free travel can also be a source of significant migration and security challenges, which need to be addressed.

The report covers the Western Balkans partners and Eastern Partnership countries as well as other regions beyond the EU’s immediate neighbourhood (the Eastern Caribbean and Latin America), focusing on visa-free countries where specific migration and/or security-related issues have been identified, which could be assessed under the visa suspension mechanism.

This report focuses on visa policy alignment, migration, border management and readmission, security issues and citizenship questions. The main findings are presented in this report, organised by key themes, while country-specific recommendations are provided in the annex.

Visa policy alignment

The close geographical proximity of Western Balkan partners and Eastern Partnership countries to the territory of EU Member States makes visa policy alignment with EU visa policy a matter of major importance. Insufficient alignment, both regarding the list of visa-required countries and the procedures for issuing visas, can lead to increased illegal migration and security risks for the EU.

Insufficient visa policy alignment makes it easier for nationals of third countries subject to the EU visa requirement, some of which present high migratory risks, to reach the Western Balkans without a visa (some with fraudulent travel documents), and subsequently to enter illegally by land into the Schengen area, where they may lodge asylum applications. Similarly, third-country nationals who have entered the Western Balkans with valid visas have, in some cases, crossed the Union’s external borders illegally and applied for asylum, raising serious concerns about the adequacy of visa procedures in certain Western Balkan partners.

North Macedonia is the only Western Balkan partner to have achieved near-complete alignment with EU list of visa-required countries, with just one remaining difference compared to the EU list

of visa-required countries. In 2024 and 2025, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo^{*}, and Montenegro made progress towards further alignment with the EU list of visa-required countries.

As regards Serbia and Albania, this was done in line with their commitments under the Reform Agenda¹. In 2024, Serbia reduced the number of visa-free agreements with countries subject to EU visa requirements from 16 to 12. Albania reduced the number of permanent visa-free agreements from 8 to 6 and the number of seasonal visa waivers from 6 to 5 in 2024 and 2025.

The visa policy of Kosovo only began to be monitored in 2024, when its citizens obtained visa-free access to the EU. At that time, Kosovo maintained visa-free agreements with 19 countries subject to EU visa requirements; this number has since been reduced to 17.

After the regression at the start of the year 2025, Montenegro later abolished visa-free agreements with 5 countries and reduced the number of its seasonal visa waivers from 4 to 1; as result, the total number of discrepancies between Montenegro's visa policy and that of the EU went from 15 to 9.

In 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina backtracked on previous progress in this area. Bosnia and Herzegovina maintained the number of permanent visa-free agreements at 7² but increased the number of seasonal visa waivers from 1 to 3. As a result, the number of discrepancies between its visa-policy and that of the EU increased from 8 in 2024 to 10, currently.

No real progress could be observed for countries of the Eastern Partnership. Moldova and Ukraine have the same number of visa-free agreements with countries subject to the EU visa requirement as at the end of 2024³, respectively 11 and 15.

Georgia currently maintains 26 visa-free agreements with countries that are subject to EU visa requirements and has not taken any steps towards further alignment since 2022. On the contrary, Georgia backtracked in 2024 by granting visa-free entry to citizens of China. Georgia also continues to pursue a visa policy that diverges substantially from the *EU acquis*, particularly by allowing entry to nationals of 17 countries that are visa-required both in the EU and in Georgia, solely on the basis of a visa or residence permit issued by one of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Visa-free neighbouring partners must urgently make substantial progress in aligning their lists of visa-free nationalities with those of the EU, as well as aligning their visa procedures with Schengen standards. This includes introducing the systematic collection of biometric data, such as digital

^{*} 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.

1 SWD(2024) 243 final – Commission Implementing Decision approving the Reform Agenda and the multiannual work programme under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans – Kosovo.

2 After Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced visa requirement for Oman in March 2024 the number went down to six, but when in December 2024 Vanuatu was removed from EU visa-free list, it went up again to seven.

3 Moldova cancelled one visa-free agreement in 2025, but with Vanuatu becoming visa-required in EU the number of discrepancies for this country remained the same.

photo and fingerprints, as part of the visa application process. Practices that are incompatible with the EU *acquis*, such as granting seasonal visa-waivers and allowing visa-free entry on the basis of a visa or residence permit issued by a third country, must be discontinued.

Pending full alignment, a more rigorous screening of visa-free arrivals of third-country nationals, in particular those from countries presenting security or illegal migration risks, would be a minimal temporary measure expected from visa-free neighbouring partners.

Migration, border management and readmission

The main challenge in this field remains the persistence of illegal migration flows to the EU via the Western Balkans, although the numbers have decreased significantly since 2023. This is due to the joint efforts of the EU, its Member States and relevant EU agencies, and the Western Balkan partners, notably in the framework of the *EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans*⁴ presented by the Commission in December 2022. The primary path on the ‘Western Balkans route’ goes through Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; Albania and North Macedonia also serve, to a lesser extent, as transit countries. In 2024 and 2025 the long and difficult-to-control border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia became a main entry point of irregular migrants travelling through the Western Balkans towards EU.

Western Balkan partners will need to increase their efforts to fight trafficking in human beings and to further reduce the number of irregular migrants smuggled. Levels of violence linked to trafficking in migrants have also increased in the Western Balkans. In Serbia, migrant smuggling networks operate with increasing intensity and violence, with some groups now composed partly of nationals from the same countries of origin as the irregular migrants. Efforts made to strengthen anti-trafficking policies and operational capacities in these areas will need to be further stepped up.

The significant influx into Georgia of nationals from India and to a lesser extent from other Asian and Middle East countries, raises concerns about the potential illegal migration towards the EU, whether by land or by sea.

All the reviewed partners maintain regular cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), including Bosnia and Herzegovina, which signed a Frontex status agreement with the EU in 2025⁵. Most of them also collaborate with the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). Continued support by the EU and its Member States, through the provision of equipment, training, exchange of best practices as well as joint border patrols has produced tangible operational results.

Cooperation on readmission between EU Member States and all reviewed partners was generally assessed as very good, with no major problems reported. Nevertheless, some issues with readmission were observed. Delays in the processing of readmission requests from Bosnia and

⁴ [EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans - Migration and Home Affairs](#)

⁵ [Status agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina - Migration and Home Affairs](#)

Herzegovina and Kosovo were mainly due to a lack of cooperation or obstruction by returnees, while in the case of Ukraine they resulted from the ongoing war conditions.

Minor issues were reported in the cooperation with Kosovo, where some refusals to accept EU travel documents were recorded, and with Moldova, which in certain cases declined to accept third-country nationals, who transited through its territory.

As regards Serbia, concerns also persist regarding its practice of conditioning the issuance of return documents to the prior submission of a flight plan. A further longstanding and serious concern, and despite the EU-Serbia readmission agreement, relates to Serbia's limited cooperation in the readmission of third-country nationals who have transited through its territory, including in cases where credible evidence of transit exists, such as identity documents issued by Serbian authorities to asylum seekers.

All these partners are expected to address without delay the remaining outstanding issues identified by EU Member States concerning the implementation of commitments on readmission.

For Moldova and Ukraine, the cooperation with Frontex on border management has remained satisfactory in 2024 and 2025.

Unfounded asylum applications

Unfounded asylum applications lodged by nationals of visa-exempt partners continue to pose a significant challenge for some EU Member States. These applications typically have very low recognition rates⁶ placing a disproportionate burden on national asylum systems. Between 2015 and the first quarter of 2025, 18% of asylum applications in the EU were submitted by nationals benefiting from visa-free access to the EU.

The number of asylum applications lodged by this category in the EU neighbourhood has generally declined; however, applications from Kosovo and, in particular, Ukraine increased significantly in 2024 (6,785 and 28,350 respectively). In the case of Albania (7,140), Georgia (14,530), Moldova (5,945), North Macedonia (3,435) and Serbia (3,270), although the numbers decreased considerably in 2024 as compared to 2023, they nevertheless remained at considerable levels.

Efforts have been made by partners in the EU's immediate neighbourhood to mitigate this problem. Several governments, including Albania, Georgia and Kosovo, have sponsored information campaigns to raise public awareness about the rights and obligations associated with visa-free travel to the EU. Additional measures include the introduction of exit checks on citizens travelling to the Schengen area (Albania and Georgia) to verify that they fulfil entry conditions in the Schengen area and the deployment of Frontex officers at international airports (Georgia). These initiatives have proven effective and should be maintained and expanded to other partners.

As reported in the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism report, the number of asylum applications lodged in the EU by Latin American countries benefitting from visa-free access continues to place a significant burden on Member States' asylum systems. Between 2015 and Q1 2025, nationals

⁶ With the exception of Ukraine.

from Latin American visa-free countries accounted for more than half of all asylum claims submitted by visa-exempt third-country nationals during this period. In 2024, the number of applications from Venezuela amounted to 74,015, continuing a consistent upward trend; the number of applications from Peru also increased to 27,260. Applications from Colombia declined, but in absolute numbers they remain concerning (51,615). Applications from Honduras (2,380), Nicaragua (2,475) and El Salvador (2,575) also declined but nevertheless remained at significant levels.

To ensure the sustainability of visa exemptions, visa-free travel must remain strictly limited to short stays and should not be misused to lodge asylum applications in the EU. In this context, the Commission and the EEAS will continue engaging with the most relevant countries to prevent abuse of the visa-free regime.

Public order and security issues, including the fight against corruption and document security

All reviewed countries maintained close cooperation with Europol and Eurojust. Western Balkan partners continued to actively implement the Joint Action Plan on Counter Terrorism for the Western Balkans and signed the new Joint Action Plan on 30 October 2025⁷.

In 2024, all Western Balkan partners continued to cooperate with Europol and Member States resulting in substantial operational results in combating serious cross-border crimes, including cyber-attacks, the smuggling of migrants, and the trafficking of narcotics and firearms by organised crime groups. Concrete and significant results were achieved in dismantling numerous criminal groups by all Western Balkan partners.

Despite the ongoing war, Ukraine has continued intensive cooperation with Europol in counter-terrorism efforts, as well as in the fight against financial crime, cybercrime, the trafficking of firearms, explosives, CBRN⁸ materials and trafficking in human beings.

Some Member States signalled the emergence of firearms trafficking routes from the Near and Middle East through Moldova into the EU.

Security concerns persist in Georgia due to Russian influence, especially in light of the rapid growth of the resident Russian diaspora. Since the onset of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, approximately 160,000 Russian citizens have emigrated to Georgia. There is a growing apprehension that the Russian presence in Georgia could be exploited for foreign influence operations.

The fight against corruption was a key benchmark accepted by all visa-free partners in the EU's immediate neighbourhood during the visa liberalisation dialogues. Continuous compliance with this benchmark remains a prerequisite for maintaining visa-free travel. Most reviewed countries have respected this requirement, including by implementing measures to address issues raised in

⁷ [Joint Action Plan on Preventing and Countering of Terrorism and Violent Extremism for the Western Balkans - Migration and Home Affairs](#)

⁸ Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN).

previous Visa Suspension Mechanism reports. However, Georgia not only has failed to adequately follow up on the recommendations on anti-corruption set out in the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism report but backtracked by cancelling some earlier reforms in this field.

Regarding document security, all reviewed partners, with the exception of Ukraine, have fully phased out non-biometric passports. The last non-biometric Ukrainian passports were issued in 2016 and will expire in 2026; the number still in circulation is marginal. Nonetheless, Member States have reported the use of fraudulent or forged documents by citizens of Albania, Kosovo and Ukraine to illegally enter or stay in the EU, some of which are obtained through corruption practices.

In Georgia, Kosovo, Serbia and Ukraine, the possibility for individuals to change their names and obtain new identity documents, sometimes repeatedly, remains problematic, as it may be used to evade Schengen Information System (SIS) alerts and circumvent EU return or entry bans. This vulnerability should be addressed, by external partners in cooperation with the EU.

In Ukraine, the practice of holding more than one valid biometric passport, as well as manual alterations of travel documents (such as extension of expiry dates) raises serious concerns about document integrity and reliability.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, organised crime groups are reported to be engaged in the production and distribution of forged identity documents, including passports and driving licences of various EU Member States. In Serbia, in particular, the scale and sophistication of these forgeries is alarming, with some high-quality counterfeit e-passports capable of bypassing modern document verification systems.

Citizenship questions, including investor citizenship schemes

Visa-free countries operating investor citizenship schemes pose inherent security risks by potentially allowing third-country nationals who would otherwise be subject to visa requirements to bypass standard security checks and gain access to the Schengen area through the acquisition of citizenship.

Such programmes represent serious risks in terms of illegal migration, security threats, and tax evasion. These risks are particularly acute when they are combined with: (i) insufficient vetting and due diligence; (ii) the absence of a genuine link between applicants and the country granting citizenship; and (iii) the possibility of changing one's name during or after the process.

Consequently, under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism, the operation of such programmes constitutes, in itself, a ground for suspending the visa-free status of third countries.

Among neighbouring countries, such programmes persist in North Macedonia, where national legislation allows citizenship to be granted without prior residence requirements to individuals deemed to represent a 'special economic interest' for the country. However, the number of citizenships granted under this provision remains marginal (one in 2023 and two in 2024).

Montenegro formally terminated its programme on 31 December 2022. Nevertheless, the authorities have continued to process applications for citizenship submitted before the

programme's closure. In 2024, the Ministry of Interior issued 1,282 decisions granting Montenegrin citizenship to applicants and their family members. As of April 2025, 29 remaining applications were still being processed.

Although Serbia does not operate such a programme *sensu stricto*, a provision in its citizenship law allows granting citizenship “in the interest of the Republic of Serbia”. This provision enables citizenship to be conferred without any prior residence requirement and without obliging applicants to renounce their existing nationality. Since 2022, more than 200 Russian nationals have obtained Serbian citizenship under this clause, and the profiles of several of these individuals have raised concerns on the EU side.

A similar concern exists regarding Georgia. Although numbers are very limited compared to the normal track for acquisition of citizenship, simplified naturalisation procedures could be used by Russian nationals to acquire citizenship. Both the Serbian and Georgian cases warrant further scrutiny to determine whether those practices are abusive. As indicated in the Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package, compliance with EU law requires that candidate countries abolish existing investor citizenship schemes and repeal their legal basis⁹.

In the Eastern Caribbean, investor citizenship schemes have been operated for many years in five countries – Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia. These programmes pose a significant and ongoing challenge of much greater scale. It is estimated that around 107,000 passports have been issued through the schemes operated by these countries. The number of applications remains high, with 13,113 in 2023 and 10,573 in 2024. Processing times are short and rejection rates very low – for instance, in 2024 rejection rates were 1.7% in Antigua and Barbuda, 5.3% in Saint Lucia, and 6.5% in Dominica – raising concerns about the adequacy of security and due diligence procedures.

In response to concerns expressed by the EU¹⁰, the five Eastern Caribbean countries have taken some steps, including harmonising the minimum investment threshold at USD 200,000, strengthening security screening, and establishing common standards for information-sharing and transparency. However, the situation continues to raise significant concern.

The operation of investor citizenship schemes by visa-free countries poses a non-negligible security risk for the Schengen area and will be further examined under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism legal framework.

⁹ See judgment of 29 April 2025, *Commission v Malta (Citoyenneté par investissement)*, C-181/23, ECLI:EU:C:2025:283. On 29 April 2025, where the Court of Justice of the European Union found that a Member State breaches Article 20 TFEU and the principle of sincere cooperation enshrined in Article 4(3) TEU when it establishes and implements a naturalisation scheme based on a transactional procedure between that Member State and persons submitting an application under that programme, at the end of which the nationality of that Member State and, therefore, the status of Union citizen, is essentially granted in exchange for predetermined payments or investments.

¹⁰ Similar concerns were expressed by the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. The measures taken also aim at responding to US demands. Citizens of these countries are currently visa-required to travel to the US. [Visa Waiver Program | Homeland Security](#)

Lack of compliance on other key benchmarks by Georgia

Respect for fundamental rights constitutes one of the key benchmarks agreed by Georgia during the visa liberalisation dialogue. Continued compliance with this benchmark remains a core condition for maintaining the right to visa-free travel.

In the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report of 6 December 2024, the Commission assessed that Georgia had failed to uphold this commitment, notably through the adoption of the *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence* in May 2024 and the legislative package on *Family Values and Protection of Minors* in September 2024. Both initiatives were found to be in violation of fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular the freedom of association, assembly and freedom of expression, and the right to privacy, as the former could be used against civil society and to silence opposition parties, and the latter imposed discriminatory restrictions on education, as well as public debates and gatherings in breach of the principle of non-discrimination. As a result, the Commission issued specific recommendations calling on Georgia to:

- Ensure and uphold the protection of fundamental rights of all citizens, including freedom of association, assembly and expression, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public affairs, and the prohibition of discrimination.
- Avoid and repeal any legislation that restricts fundamental rights and freedoms, contradicts the principle of non-discrimination, or violates relevant European and international standards. In particular, repeal the *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence* and the legislative package on *Family Values and Protection of Minors*, and amend the national strategy and action plan on human rights to ensure the full protection of the rights of LGBTIQ persons.

Since then, Georgia has failed to implement these recommendations and has instead regressed further in key areas of governance and fundamental rights. Legislative amendments, including the *Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)* and changes to the *Law on Grants*, the *Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens*, the *Code on Administrative Offences*, and the *Law on Broadcasting*, have collectively curtailed civic space and restricted dissenting voices, including those of protestors, opposition representatives, civil society organisations, and independent media. It particularly affected civil society associations and human rights defenders, multiplying various obstacles to make their activities more difficult and as result limit their ability to function.

On 14 July 2025, the European Commission recalled in a letter to Georgian authorities the requirement for continued compliance with visa liberalisation requirements, requesting an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report. In its response, Georgia did not inform of any meaningful progress in addressing the recommendations related to fundamental rights of the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report. Consequently, Georgia continues to be in breach of the benchmarks underpinning the visa-free regime granted by the EU. In light of these developments, appropriate measures should be considered under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism.

Conclusion

While most partners in the EU's neighbourhood have taken steps to address the recommendations issued under previous Visa Suspension Mechanism reports, **significant challenges persist**.

The **most serious case concerns Georgia**, which has violated numerous commitments undertaken during the visa liberalisation dialogue, failed to implement nearly all recommendations of the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism report, and despite repeated requests over the past years to advance on visa policy alignment and on prevention of corruption has even further backtracked in 2024-2025 including in relation to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

For the other partners in the **Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership** region, it remains imperative to advance visa policy alignment, both by harmonising the lists of visa-required third countries and by ensuring that visa examination and issuance procedures are fully consistent with Schengen standards. Pending full alignment, Western Balkan partners should urgently strengthen the screening of visa-free arrivals of nationals from third countries posing illegal migration or security risks.

The **prevention of unfounded asylum applications** should remain a priority for all visa-free partners, in particular Albania, Georgia, Kosovo and Moldova. Bosnia and Herzegovina should intensify its efforts to reinforce border management, while continued vigilance is required regarding **citizenship practices of Georgia and Serbia**.

Beyond the EU's immediate neighbourhood, the continued operation of investor citizenship schemes in the Eastern Caribbean represents a **persistent and serious security concern**, constituting a potential ground for the suspension of visa-free travel under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism.

Detailed, country-specific recommendations are set out in Annex I.

The Commission will continue to **closely monitor the implementation of visa liberalisation commitments** through high-level political dialogues, meetings of the Justice, Freedom and Security Subcommittees, and its regular annual reporting under the Visa Suspension Mechanism and the Enlargement Package.

Annex I: Recommendations of the 8th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report

Albania

Albania has taken steps to address most of the Commission's previous recommendations. However, further progress is necessary in the following areas:

- a) *Alignment of visa policy*: As a matter of priority, Albania must further align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries, with particular focus on those countries whose nationals present illegal migration and/or security risks to the EU. Albania should also align its visa procedures with Schengen standards, in particular by introducing the collection of biometric data (including a digital photo and fingerprints) as part of the examination of visa demands. Pending full alignment, Albania should continue and strengthen the screening of visa-exempt third-country nationals, especially those originating from countries presenting security or illegal migration risks.
- b) *Unfounded asylum applications*: Albania must continue and reinforce measures aimed at reducing the number of unfounded asylum applications lodged by its nationals in EU Member States, with particular attention to applications submitted by unaccompanied minors.
- c) *Prevention of illegal stays*: Albania must maintain and tighten measures to prevent the overstays by Albanian nationals in the Schengen area.
- d) *Visa issuance and hiring oversight*: Albania must strengthen the screening process for visa applications submitted by third-country nationals from countries that present illegal migration and/or security risks to EU. It should also tighten the conditions for issuing such visas, improve the monitoring of hiring practices and enhance the capacity of labour inspectorates.
- e) *Combating fraudulent identity documents*: Albania must intensify efforts to detect and prevent the use and circulation of counterfeit Albanian identity documents.
- f) *Investor citizenship scheme follow-up*: Refrain from establishing and implementing an investor citizenship scheme and repeal the legal basis for such a scheme by amending the Law on Citizenship.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken some steps to address the Commission's previous recommendations. However, further efforts are necessary in the following priority areas:

- a) *Alignment of visa policy*: Bosnia and Herzegovina must, as a matter of urgency, further align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries, with particular focus on those countries whose nationals pose illegal migration and/or security risks to the EU.

- b) *Visa issuance controls*: The authorities must enhance the screening of visa applications submitted by third-country nationals from high-risk countries and tighten the conditions under which visas are issued to nationals of such countries.
- c) *Border management 1*: Bosnia and Herzegovina must intensify its efforts to improve border management, with particular urgency given to increasing the capacity of border guards, addressing the issue of illegal border crossings and advancing the implementation of the Frontex Status Agreement through launching more joint operations at high-risk sections of the land border.
- d) *Border management 2*: Pending full alignment of visa-policy, it is essential to continue and strengthen the screening at border of arrivals of visa-exempt third-country nationals; particular attention is recommended to the verification of the authenticity of passports. Authorities are strongly encouraged to proactively engage on this issue with third countries as well as airlines and progress on establishing passenger data exchange (API/PNR) systems.

Georgia

On 14 July 2025, the European Commission sent a formal letter to the Georgian authorities recalling the obligation of continued compliance with the visa liberalisation benchmarks and requesting detailed information on the implementation of the recommendations set out in the 7th Visa Suspension Mechanism Report.

In its response, Georgia did not inform about **any meaningful progress** in addressing the Commission's recommendations. In most areas, **no corrective measures were reported** and in several others the situation has **further deteriorated**.

Of particular concern is the continued application of legislative acts, including the (i) *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence*, (ii) the *Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors*, (iii) the *Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)* and (iv) *amendments to the Law on Grants, the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, the Code on Administrative Offences, the Law on Broadcasting and the Criminal Code*, which **restrict fundamental rights and freedoms and contradict Georgia's European and other international commitments**. Rather than taking remedial steps, the Georgian authorities have **openly defended these measures**, invoking national sovereignty and disregarding the commitments undertaken during the visa liberalisation dialogue.

The Commission therefore concludes that **Georgia has regressed significantly** on key governance and rule-of-law benchmarks that formed the basis for the granting of visa-free travel. Similarly, Georgia regressed also in the domains of visa-alignment and fight against corruption. This situation **constitutes a clear case of backtracking** on commitments made under the visa liberalisation process and **undermines the mutual trust** on which the visa-free regime is based.

Given the **systemic and deliberate nature** of this backsliding, the Commission will consider appropriate measures under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism. According to the new rules, in the first phase, the visa suspension could target holders of diplomatic, service and official passports issued by the Georgian authorities, who are primarily responsible for not taking action to address the Commission's recommendations. The new rules ensure a uniform application of the

suspension in all Member States, as bilateral visa exemptions for holders of diplomatic, service and official passports will no longer be possible, once the visa requirement is reimposed for these groups at EU level. In the second stage, the suspension could be extended to the entire population if issues are not addressed by the Georgian authorities. Ultimately, Georgia could lose its visa free status entirely and be transferred to Annex I of the Visa Regulation (visa-required third countries list).

Georgia is also required to terminate immediately the practice of allowing visa-free entry to nationals of 17 countries that are visa-required both in the EU and in Georgia, on the basis of a visa or residence permit issued by one of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Kosovo

Overall Kosovo continues to fulfil the visa liberalisation requirements. However, further efforts are necessary to address the following outstanding issues:

- a) *Alignment of visa policy*: Kosovo must align its list of visa-required third countries with the EU list. Pending full alignment, Kosovo should continue and strengthen the screening of visa-exempt travellers who pose a potential migration and/or security risk. Kosovo should also align its visa procedures with Schengen standards, in particular by introduction of collection of biometric data (including a digital photo and fingerprints) as part of the examination of visa demands.
- b) *Addressing unfounded asylum applications*: Kosovo must strengthen the initiatives in cooperation with EU Member States to monitor and curb the number of unfounded asylum applications submitted by its citizens in the EU. It should also maintain and adapt the ongoing communication campaign to inform citizens of their rights and obligations under the visa-free regime with the EU.
- c) *Strengthening document security*: Kosovo must strengthen measures to prevent the issuance of identity and travel documents under false identities and improve the detection of forged documents. It should ensure cooperation with Member States as regards individuals subject to alerts in the Schengen Information System (SIS) who might apply for a travel document with changed names. Continued cooperation with Interpol on lost and stolen documents should be maintained, alongside full implementation of the new Law and Administrative Instruction on Identity Cards to enhance overall document security.
- d) *Protection of non-majority communities*: Kosovo should continue to make tangible improvements in protecting the rights of non-majority communities.

Moldova

Moldova has taken steps to address the Commission's previous recommendations. However, further progress is required, particularly in the following areas:

- a) *Alignment of visa policy*: Moldova must align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required countries, in particular with regard to countries presenting illegal migration or security risks to the EU. Pending full alignment, Moldova should continue and strengthen

the rigorous screening of visa-exempt third-country nationals, especially those originating from high-risk countries.

- b) *Unfounded asylum applications*: Moldova must intensify efforts to address the continued occurrence of unfounded asylum applications by Moldovan nationals in EU Member States. This could include targeted information campaigns tailored to relevant migrant profiles, as well as the introduction of border exit checks to improve tracking and deterrence.

Montenegro

Montenegro addressed some of the Commission's previous recommendations, in particular by reducing the list of visa-free countries that are visa-required for the EU, and by continuing to monitor the remaining applications for citizenship. However, the following issues remain to be addressed:

- a) *Alignment with the EU visa list*: Montenegro must align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries. **Montenegro must not grant any more seasonal visa-waivers, including to those countries, that were removed from the permanent visa-free list.** Montenegro should also align its visa procedures with Schengen standards, in particular by introduction of collection of biometric data (including a digital photo and fingerprints) as part of the examination of visa demands.

In the interim, Montenegro must implement targeted security measures, such as enhanced screening of visa-exempt arrivals, and document their effectiveness in reducing illegal migration and security risks.

- b) *Visa application infrastructure*: In preparation for the transition to a revised visa policy, Montenegro should expand its visa issuance capabilities through digitising elements of the visa issuance process to allow nationals of currently visa-exempt countries to apply for a visa once the exemption is lifted. This will facilitate administrative processing and support policy alignment
- c) *Investor citizenship scheme follow-up*: Montenegro must ensure that the legal basis of the scheme is repealed and all pending applications under the now-terminated scheme are processed in accordance with the highest security standards. **In addition, possible cases of citizenships previously granted through this scheme to individuals subject to international restrictive measures must be reviewed and revoked where appropriate.**

North Macedonia

North Macedonia continues to demonstrate a satisfactory level of cooperation in the fields of migration, border management, and security. Some steps have been taken to address the

Commission's previous recommendations concerning the acquisition of citizenship on grounds of special economic interest. Further efforts are required to address the following key issues:

- a) *Visa policy alignment*: North Macedonia must complete the alignment of its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries. North Macedonia should also align its visa procedures with Schengen standards, in particular by introduction of collection of biometric data (including a digital photo and fingerprints) as part of the examination of visa applications.
- b) North Macedonia should report on the implementation and effectiveness of additional screening measures applied to Turkish nationals arriving in the country, especially with regard to illegal migration and security risks.
- c) *Overstays*: To mitigate the persistent phenomenon of nationals of North Macedonia overstaying in the Schengen area, the authorities must implement targeted initiatives, including information campaigns on the conditions of visa-free travel and enhanced cooperation with Member States.
- d) *Investor citizenship scheme*: North Macedonia must abolish the scheme and repeal its legal basis, provide information on the applications already submitted under the 'special economic interest' provision and ensure that all such applications undergo rigorous background checks.

Serbia

Serbia has taken steps to address the Commission's previous recommendations. However, further progress is required in several key areas, particularly with regard to migration, visa policy, and acquisition of citizenship. The following issues need to be addressed:

- a) *Visa policy alignment*: Serbia must further align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries, with a particular focus on those countries whose nationals pose a heightened risk of illegal migration or security threats to the EU. Serbia should also align its visa procedures with Schengen standards, in particular by introducing the collection of biometric data (including a digital photo and fingerprints) as part of the examination of visa demands. Pending full alignment, Serbia should continue to strengthen screening measures for visa-exempt third-country nationals, especially from high-risk countries.
- b) *Visa issuance procedures*: Serbia must enhance the screening of visa applications submitted by nationals of countries considered to present illegal migration or security risks. In parallel, the rules governing the issuance of visas to such nationals should be tightened to ensure greater control and consistency with EU standards.
- c) *Implementation of readmission obligations*: Serbia must fully implement the third-country nationals' clause of the EU–Serbia Readmission Agreement, particularly in cases where third-country nationals transited through Serbian territory and such transit is demonstrably documented.
- d) *Citizenship practices*: Serbia must refrain from granting citizenship under accelerated or

simplified procedures to nationals of countries that pose illegal migration or security risks to the EU. Moreover, adequate and thorough security screening should be ensured for all applicants, including under the ordinary naturalisation procedure.

Ukraine

Overall, Ukraine continues to meet the requirements of the visa liberalisation framework and has taken steps to address several of the Commission's previous recommendations. Nonetheless, further efforts are needed, where feasible given the ongoing war-related challenges, in particular, the following:

- a) *Visa policy alignment*: Ukraine must align its visa policy with the EU list of visa-required third countries, with a particular focus on countries whose nationals present illegal migration or security risks to the EU.
- b) *Document security*: Ukraine is encouraged to make greater efforts to address the issue of use of fraudulent documents, including but not limited to passports.
- c) *Anti-corruption efforts*: Ukraine is encouraged to continue strengthening its anti-corruption framework by further developing a credible and consistent track record of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions in corruption-related cases.

Latin America

Addressing overstays and unfounded asylum applications: While recognising increased efforts by concerned Latin American countries, they should take further measures to curb the number of overstays and unfounded asylum applications submitted by their citizens in the EU. Such measures, already being taken by some countries, should include, when possible, departure checks/verifications, communication campaign to inform citizens of their rights and obligations under the visa-free regime with the EU, as well as other measures that might be agreed either with EU or bilaterally with EU Member States.

Eastern Caribbean countries operating investor citizenship schemes

The operation of investor citizenship schemes by countries that are visa-free in the EU constitutes a serious security concern. The operation of a scheme, whereby citizenship is granted in exchange for pre-determined payments or investments, without the person concerned having any genuine link to that third country, constitutes a potential ground for the suspension of visa-free travel under the revised Visa Suspension Mechanism. Concerned Eastern Caribbean countries should take all measures necessary for adequate security vetting of applicants, pending the discontinuation of those schemes.