

Joint Statement on Visa Liberalization

by pro-European civil society actors

*Addressed to the Council of the EU,
Governments of the EU member states*

For the last two years, civil society in Ukraine has exerted its best efforts to push for reforms that were provided by the Visa liberalization action plan (VLAP).

In 2016, the European Commission in its communications to the Council of the EU and to the European Parliament [2016/0125 \(COD\)](#), as well as in supporting documents, confirmed that Ukraine has achieved all the VLAP benchmarks. Meanwhile, civil society organizations in Ukraine continue to work hard to ensure the sustainability of reforms.

The success of these reforms became a symbolic proof that the new Ukraine is able to implement comprehensive pro-European changes, including those in politically sensitive sectors such as the fight against corruption.

Therefore, we are deeply concerned and dismayed by the recent news that some of the EU member-states endorse the postponement of the visa liberalization to the citizens of Ukraine through their support for binding this decision to the approval of the mechanism for the visa-free regime suspension.

According to the recent media reports, Ministers of the Interior of Belgium, France and Germany have publicly expressed their support for this idea after the Justice and Home Affairs Council session on 20.05.2015.

In no way challenging the need to control the migration flows by the EU, we, representatives of pro-European civil society organizations and think-tanks in Ukraine, would like to inform you of the expected consequences for the EU-Ukraine relations if the EU postpones the visa liberalization to our country.

Ukrainian society perceives visa waiver as a benchmark that indicates whether the EU is ready for a close cooperation with Ukraine. Visa-free regime has a high symbolism that exceeds its practical effect. Numerous statements of Ukrainian and European officials regarding the possibility of the visa liberalization this summer boost up these expectations.

Any postponement of the Council's decision on visa liberalization would be perceived as an artificial delaying of the process and send a negative message regarding the EU readiness to deepen relations with Ukraine.

Such action will inevitably be used by the skeptics both in Ukraine and abroad, which, in turn, would lead to the drastic decline of the EU credibility in the Ukrainian society.

It should be noted that within the last year skeptics were constantly pushing the narrative of the "hypocritical Europe that doesn't keep promises and was never going to waive visas." This scenario would be perceived by the society as a proof of their arguments.

The influence of this decision on political circles would be even stronger.

The prospect of the visa waiver was the key impetus for the VLAP-supported reforms. Verkhovna Rada has endorsed the most sensitive anticorruption laws (e.g. laws on special confiscation and on assets recovery agency) as well as an antidiscrimination legislation only after MPs were persuaded that the visa waiver is a real and close possibility.

Now Ukrainian political elites and the society are looking forward to the Council's decision.

Any delay would critically undermine the trust of Ukrainian politicians toward the EU as a partner that delivers on its pledges. This would complicate and in some cases make impossible to advocate for other sensitive reforms that are backed by the EU in the Ukrainian parliament.

We are also concerned that certain political forces that oppose further EU-Ukraine rapprochement would use public anger to reverse some parts of anticorruption and antidiscrimination legislation.

It is worth stressing that due to the high sensitivity of this issue, it would be very hard to convince the society and political elites that the postponement is temporary and technical in nature.

We support the EU intention to impose better control of the migration flow and to introduce the mechanisms for the suspension of visa liberalization. At the same time, we would like to draw the attention to the fact that the new rules would be applicable to all visa-free countries and that there is no legal need to synchronize the adoption of the new suspension rules and visa waiver for Ukraine. According to the EC survey, as of today Ukraine does not pose a migration risk for the EU.

For the foregoing reasons, we call upon the EU member states to endorse the decision as soon as it is technically possible. **We count on the EU support for Ukraine and hope that in the late summer of 2016 Ukrainian biometric passport holders would enjoy visa-free regime for short-term travels to the EU.**

We also express our support to the [Council position](#) on the introduction of monitoring mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of VLAP-related reforms. Although we would like to stress that the creation of this tool in no way should be a reason for the postponement of the visa liberalization since under this scenario it could have an opposite effect and lead to the reversal of some reforms before the monitoring is imposed.

The statement is endorsed by:

Reanimation Package of Reforms
NGO Europe Without Barriers
Transparency International Ukraine
Anticorruption Action Center
European Pravda NGO
Centre UA
Centre for Economic Strategy
Institute of World Policy

Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation
Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiative Foundation
Stronger Together information campaign
Center for Political Studies and Analysis "EIDOS"
Ukrainian Center for Independent Political
Research
Center for Local Self-Governance
Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law
NGO Ukrainian Science Club