
SERBIA ENDS VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR IRANIANS, CITING 'ABUSES' BY SOME

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Serbia has scrapped visa-free entry for Iranians little more than year after it was introduced out of concern that some Iranians were using the system as an avenue to permanently relocate to Europe.

The Serbian government's move to abolish Iran's visa-free status on October 11 came amid claims that it was being "abused" by Iranian migrants seeking to illegally enter the European Union once they got to Serbia.

More than 15,000 Iranians have visited Serbia since visas were abolished in August 17. Serbian media have reported that direct flights connecting Belgrade and Tehran have been coming into the country full but returning empty.

Migrant aid organizations say many of the Iranian visitors moved on toward Western Europe or sought asylum rather than return home.

Serbia, which is a candidate to join the EU but is not yet a member, borders EU member nations like Croatia.

EU officials reportedly have been considering canceling visa-free entry for Serbia's citizens unless the Balkan country reintroduced visas for Iranians.

Belgrade, which has a history of close ties with Iran, decided to abolish visas for Iranians last year in a bid to boost tourism, improve growth, and reach out to non-European markets.

Speaking to parliament on October 10, Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic said a number of Iranians were "abusing" visa-free travel, forcing Serbia to abolish the system.

So far this year, around 1,100 Iranians have officially sought asylum in Serbia, a move that gives them access to refugee centers where they can get shelter and food.

Currently there are around 4,000 registered migrants from Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere in Serbia's government-operated centers, while hundreds of others are scattered in the capital Belgrade or around borders with Bosnia or Croatia.

More than 650,000 people, many of them fleeing war and poverty, passed through Serbia in 2015 on their way to the West before the route was largely shut down in 2016 through a toughening of EU borders.

With reporting by AP and Reuters

Kaynak/Source: