
EU RAISES SPECTRE OF POST-BREXIT UK VISA REGIME

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UK nationals may need to buy visas to enter the EU after Brexit, if that is what the European Commission proposes next month.

The visa regime, to be discussed at a commission meeting on 13 November, could see UK adults forced to pay each, fill in a three-page form, and wait up to six weeks before they get permission to enter the EU's so-called 'Schengen' travel area.

That is what would happen if the EU took the first option in its deliberation on whether to "place the United Kingdom on either the 'visa required' list of third countries or the 'visa free' list", due to be adopted by the end of the year, according to a new commission "work programme" that was published on Tuesday (23 October).

The decision - part of the EU's "Brexit preparedness" planning - is to be shaped by progress on an overarching Brexit deal on the UK's withdrawal and on future relations.

That deal must be agreed by mid-November if EU states and the UK are to ratify it in time for Britain's departure in March.

The visa wall is more likely to slam down if there is no deal.

If there is a deal, then existing free-travel arrangements will apply until 2021 in a transition period.

But even if there is a deal and if the UK is granted a visa waiver, then UK nationals will still face new barriers to get into Schengen.

They will have to pay a "travel authorisation fee" and wait up to 96 hours to be told if they can travel.

That is because the UK will become a "third country" and, as such, will fall under new security arrangements, called the European Travel Information and Authorisation System, due to come into life in 2020.

Sensitive time

The commission work programme, an annual exercise, comes at a sensitive time, after 700,000 people attended a rally in London last weekend calling for a second Brexit referendum.

Immigration has been at the heart of the Brexit debate ever since eurosceptics campaigned to leave the EU on grounds that too many Poles and other EU nationals from poorer states were moving to the UK due to Europe's "free movement" law.

British leader Theresa May, earlier this month, said EU nationals will in future also be forced to pass through "e-gate visa checks" for short stays and will not get any preferential treatment if they applied to come to work in Britain.

"It [Britain's new immigration rules] will be a skills-based system where it is workers' skills that matter, not where they come from," she said.

Meanwhile, individual EU states are also making preparations for a potential no-deal UK exit.

French officials told British broadcaster the BBC last week that France "will not start visas" on UK nationals, but only if the UK did not impose visas on French people.

The preamble of a draft law to be considered by the French senate in coming weeks raised the possibility that British people could face a "requirement to present a visa to enter the French territory and to justify a residence permit to stay there" if talks go awry.

Africa list

The EU currently has visa waivers for 60 countries, including ones such as Bosnia, Guatemala, Moldova, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

A British visa requirement would put it into the same category as countries such as Afghanistan, China, Russia, and most African states.

The EU also has a visa waiver for US nationals.

But this has proved controversial because the US still has visa requirements for EU nationals from Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Poland, and Romania.

An EU law on visa "reciprocity" means the bloc should have imposed visas on US travellers in return.

It did not do so citing the multi-billion euro costs for EU businesses and the rupture in US relations that that would entail, in a sign of what could also happen if there was a UK visa regime.

US conundrum

But the commission work programme said on Tuesday that the EU executive would revisit the US problem, given that bilateral talks between the US and the five EU states in question have failed to bear fruit.

"By December 2018, the commission will publish a communication on visa reciprocity to take stock of the state of play and the possible ways forward as regards the situation of non-reciprocity with the United States in the area of visa policy," the work programme said.

A communication is not legally binding, but lets member states know how the commission thinks they should act.

The work programme also announced 13 other new initiatives to be put into place before Jean-Claude Juncker's commission departs at the end of 2019.

Rule of law

These included a non-binding proposal, due early next year, on how to "strengthen" EU monitoring of rule-of-law violations in countries such as Hungary and Poland.

The programme noted there were 84 existing initiatives, made up of dozens more individual bills, in the pipeline still to be adopted.

These covered: EU asylum law reforms; the next long-term EU budget; banking union; new VAT rules; tax rules for multinationals; digital copyright reforms; anti-money laundering laws; a foreign investor screening regime; and new whistleblower protection laws, among others.

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