

Visa-free travel is a path towards a more modernised and closer EU-Russia partnership



by Olga Gulina

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The flags of Spain and EU outside the Spanish Embassy in Moscow.

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In June 2010, the EU-Russia summit ended in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. The leaders of the European Union and the Russian Federation discussed avenues for rapprochement as well as their mutual relations and announced a partnership for modernisation with the idea of visa-free travel for Russian and EU citizens.

At the press conference that followed, the then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made a strong statement underlining Russia's readiness and aspiration to abolish the visa regime between the EU and Russia, saying, "Our country is ready to tackle this problem (the abolition of visas). We are ready to cooperate. It is, of course, easy for us. We are one country. The EU comprises 27 countries."

Some people believed it was a good starting point. In reality, this turned out to be the end of a good beginning. A decade has now passed and many things have changed, while others have stayed frozen in time. Russia is no longer a strategic partner for the EU, and the issue of an EU-Russia visa liberalisation regime has moved far off the bilateral political agenda.

Previous attempts to facilitate and liberalise the visa regime between the EU and Russia roughly have fallen into roughly three phases: 1) a period of mutual interest marked by one-off, unilateral actions and initiatives on behalf of Russia, the EU and the (now) 27 members of the European Union, and by an ongoing dialogue

on visas reflecting a political will and understanding of common interests that lasted until 2013. The Russia-Ukraine crisis, military operations in eastern Ukraine, and the disputed legal status of Crimea have led to a profound reversal in EU-Russia relations which have frozen any discussion about a new agreement on visa liberalization; 2) a period of mutual alienation between the European Union and the Russian Federation marked by the adoption of sanctions and bans on entry to Russia and the EU; 3) a period that might be described as a "fork in the road" that began in roughly three years ago and has continued to the present.

Since 2017, Russia has unilaterally pursued a policy of visa liberalisation through the issuance of electronic visas (e-visas). In 2018, Russia experimented with visa-free entry for the first time in its history by allowing foreigners and stateless persons to travel to Russian cities that hosted international sports events with just a valid passport and a FAN ID.

Russia is now preparing to introduce free electronic visas (e-visas) starting from January 1, 2021, to facilitate visits to most places in the country. If this happens, which is a possibility given that Russian legislators have been actively working on e-visa legislation, Russia will be a country with a very liberal immigration regime.

Recently, a number of politicians in the EU and Russia have been more understanding of the fact that visa liberalization, or at least simplification

of the visa procedures to facilitate travels between Russia and the EU, can help stabilise or even improve the generally tense bilateral relations. It is important to mention that the rules of EU Regulation No 2019/1155 which was updated in February, proposed increased visa fees and longer processing times, but do not apply to Russian citizens.

Interestingly, the EU Institute for Security Studies projected an imaginary scenario for visa-free travel for Russian citizens to the EU. According to this scenario, the European Union would launch a "testing phase" of visa-free travel for Russian citizens that would last for two years, starting in 2024. However, Russian passports issued in regions with a non-recognised status – including Abkhazia, Crimea, Donbass, South Ossetia, and Transnistria – would not be valid for visa-free travel to the EU.

Implementing this scenario would enable the European Union, on the one hand, to remain true to its policies in response to Russia's violations of international law and to keep the sanctions introduced in 2014 in place and, on the other hand, to bring Russian society closer to the values of democracy and human rights professed by the European Union and to make EU member states more accessible to Russian citizens.

Visa-free travel, openness and transparency are key ingredients to build bridges and trust between Russia and the EU at the people-to-people level and the best strategy to secure a win-win outcome for both parties.



From New Europe's Knowledge Network

NOVA COMPETITIVIDADE

by Francisco Jaime Quesado

Europe as a living lab

The European innovation agenda is a permanent contract of trust and improvement between institutional actors and most of civil society's stakeholders. Living labs and open innovation are key words in this collaborative agenda as they are platforms where major players such as the Brussels-based European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) international non-profit association actively takes part in the networking challenge.

In this context, living Labs are user-centred, open innovation ecosystems based on a systematic user-creation approach that integrates research and innovation processes in real life communities and settings, while placing the citizen at the centre of innovation. This has thus shown the ability to better mould the opportunities offered by new ICT concepts and solutions to the specific needs and aspirations of local contexts, cultures, and creativity potentials.

In terms of strategy, over the last decade, innovation itself has moved from different phases that include open innovation through networked innovation and now to participative innovation, which is an integral characteristic of open innovation. Open Innovation is, itself, a new paradigm based on principles of integrated collaboration, co-created shared value, cultivated innovation ecosystems, unleashed exponential technologies, and extraordinarily rapid adoption. It aims to enhance simultaneous value creation for civil, business, academia, and government markets, which reflects a very proactive attitude towards the effective changes that society and the economy are facing.

Living labs are one example of the open innovation ecosystem development that go beyond the traditional test beds that have usually been technology driven. All living lab experiences have in common a user-centric co-design process for development and implementation for innovative ICT-based products and services. These are instrumental to the integration of RDI with territorial development policies, assuming different possible configurations that depend on the structure of an underlying innovation system like vertical tools for promoting user-driven RDI in a given sector (e.g. eHealth, Mobility, eGovernment, cultural heritage or eInclusion); 'orchestration' agents between individual users, citizens, grassroots communities (bottom-up) and the other 4P stakeholders, and as territorial innovation or "Smart Regional" models.

ENoLL has grown in 'waves' up to this day. To date, several waves have been launched resulting in some historically accepted living labs all over the world, with numerous active members. The community can be characterised as largely practice-based and supported by academic research into living labs and provides co-creation, user engagement, tests, and experimentation facilities targeting innovation in many different domains such as energy, media, mobility, healthcare, agrifood, etc. As such, ENoLL is well placed to act as a platform for best practice exchanges, learning and support, and living lab international development projects.

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