

For a Visa-Free Europe

Egemen Bağış, Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator

9th of January marked the fourth year of my tenure as the Minister for EU Affairs in Turkey. Thanks to the determination of our Government, we have taken many steps to bring Turkey closer to the EU. Yet, there is one issue that has been on top of our agenda still pending to be resolved: Schengen visa before free travel of Turkish citizens.

Facts and figures of today indicate that the visa against Turkish citizens is not legal, fair and rational.

It is not legal since Turkey has legal rights derived from the Ankara Agreement signed back in 1963. In simplest terms, the “standstill provision” laid down in the Additional Protocol of the Ankara Agreement requires member states to refrain from introducing any new restrictions and thus, prohibits the visa requirement for Turkish citizens for a number of EU member states. Since, 11 of today’s member states had not had a visa requirement for Turkish nationals at the time when the Protocol entered into force back in 1973, they shall not require visa from Turkish citizens.

In fact, the legal rights of Turks have been recognized by the Court of Justice of the European Union and the national courts of some member states including Germany and Netherlands. However, such decisions are not put into practice, which is a clear breach of the “rule of law”.

It is not fair. Turkey is the only candidate country, whose citizens are still subject to visas. Let alone the citizens of Western Balkans, around 200 million Brazilians and 120 million Mexicans are exempt from the visa requirement. Turkey is the only country that had formed a Customs Union with the EU without becoming a member. The products of Turkish businessmen can freely flow in the Union but the owner of those products cannot freely travel.

Finally, it is not rational. Recent studies indicate that the argument that large number of Turks would be flowing into European countries in case visas are lifted is invalid. Within the last decade Turkey has achieved remarkable economic growth. Turks leaving European countries to return their homeland has been outnumbering those moving into EU. Reverse-migration is

already happening. The middle-class of Turkey is steadily growing. Turks simply want to travel, spend, invest and do business in European countries.

EU countries, which are going through an economic crisis would in fact benefit from the increasing commercial, cultural, educational and touristic visits of Turkish citizens. In fact, shop owners in Greek islands last summer asked from their Government to lift visas for Turkish tourists who have been a source of income in the midst of the economic crisis.

Let me tell an anecdote that is perhaps stronger than any argument. On our trip back to Turkey from one of our recent official visits in a European capital, close to the end of the boarding of Turkish passengers, the staff of the shops and the bar & café of the Gate, started to close their stores. Asking why they were closing since it was only 7 pm and there were other flights in line, one of the salesman replied; “Turkish passengers are gone, it’s not worth to wait the passengers of other planes to Europe. People don’t spend money as they used to”.

Last year, the EU Council gave the European Commission a mandate to take steps towards visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The EU has been preparing a Road Map towards visa free regime with Turkey. We expect this Road Map to be an objective, fair and a well-defined technical document, aiming to prepare the conditions for visa-free travel of Turkish citizens. Hopefully, it should not take long before Turkish citizens are granted visa free travel.

Many European politicians and statesmen are aware of the fact that visa free travel of Turkish citizens would not have any negative socio-economic consequences for the EU countries; rather it would contribute in a myriad ways. Yet, any issue related to Turkey turns out to be a political issue used and abused in domestic politics in some member states. I hope common sense would prevail and this outdated and problematic visa issue would be resolved in the near future. Visa free travel would only contribute to a more prosperous, more dynamic and richer Europe.