

**Roundtable for professionals on the Visa Information
System (VIS)**

16 June 2015

**Speech by the Head of the Delegation of the European
Union to the Russian Federation**

Ambassador Vygaudas Ušackas

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you to this event on the roll-out of the Visa Information System in Russia. I am happy to see so many professional people here today to discuss the upcoming adjustments in the way Schengen visas will be issued in Russia. In particular, I am delighted to welcome you, Ambassador Chkhikvadze, to attend this meeting.

Dear participants,

The famous writer Ivan Bunin noted that "*a person is made happy by three things: love, interesting work and the opportunity to travel.*" He won the Nobel Prize for Literature, as the first Russian writer ever in 1933, with good insight and justification. Time flies, and a lot of water has flown under the bridge, but Bunin's wise words still make sense, also from my personal point of view. With his definition, I am myself a happy man – loving, having an

interesting job, and benefiting from a great opportunity to travel nowadays notably in Russia.

The EU has always believed in the virtue of contacts between people. It has made historical progress in establishing the principle of free movement as one of the fundamental freedoms for its citizens. The citizens of the Schengen countries are fully entitled to travel and reside across the whole Schengen territory and it takes place without controls on the Schengen internal borders.

We were therefore extremely proud to celebrate, the day before yesterday, the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Schengen Agreement.

Indeed, the creation of the Schengen area, allowing 420 million people to enjoy freedom of movement without border checks, has been one of the most tangible, popular and successful achievements of the European integration. Also non-Schengen citizens benefit from this freedom of movement, after having crossed the Schengen external borderline.

The EU has complemented those internal efforts with a number of dialogues and negotiations with various partner countries to further develop people-to-people contacts. In particular, with Russia, we have tried to ensure that the procedures are not more

complicated than is necessary, to reduce the costs to the extent possible, and to create conditions for a future visa-free regime. As a result, among other things, transits between Kaliningrad and mainland Russia were facilitated in 2003, the EU-Russia Visa Facilitation Agreement entered into force in 2007 and the residents of Kaliningrad have privileged conditions for crossing the border to Northern Poland.

Unfortunately, we are now in a lull in these efforts after some hard technical work, assessment meetings and expert missions in recent times. The common steps towards a visa-free regime were brought to a standstill following the illegal annexation of Crimea. This was rather soon after the European Commission published its report on Russia's progress towards a visa-free regime. Also other visa talks were suspended in March 2014.

In spite, and because, of the current political circumstances, we all here have a common future purpose: to try to maintain and increase the flow of travellers from the Russian Federation to the European Union. Only last week Rosstat published troublesome figures which show that tourism from Russia to the EU in January-March 2015 was 40% lower than during the first three months in 2014. Cooperation to counter this negative trend is equally important for the Schengen consulates, their external service providers and travel agencies alike.

We are keen to enhance relations with the Russian population at large and will issue Schengen visas for business leaders, representatives of civil society, the scientific and educational community, experts and independent media. We continue to welcome a tourist from Omsk to visit Oslo, a mother from Perm to see her daughter in Paris, and an athlete from Saratov to compete in Stockholm. Despite a decrease in tourism notably towards the end of 2014, Russia remains by far the country where most Schengen visas are issued – 5.8 million visas in 2014. And in 99 cases out of 100, the traveller's application is immediately approved.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the same time, we have to ensure that all legitimate mobility takes place in a secure environment, that *bona fide* travellers are not disadvantaged by *mala fide* ones. It is sad but true that there are always people with bad intentions who want to exploit the system. The monthly Schengen Counsellors' meetings in Moscow and St. Petersburg regularly exchange information on such cases. In this regard I would like to thank Mr Jani Taivalantti for his work in the last 5 years.

Another great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, once wrote that "*spring is the time of plans and projects*". Back then in 1878, he surely did not have the Schengen Visa Information System in mind.

Nevertheless, the Schengen Consulates-General have been busy in springtime, and before, to plan for the roll-out of the VIS in Russia, in close cooperation with the external service providers, travel agencies and other partners.

We all already know that the VIS entails, as the main novelty, the collection of ten fingerprints from the Schengen visa applicants. And it is not a novelty – I have already delivered fingerprints for my national passport. This system will provide the Schengen states with a modern and efficient visa application system and represents a major step forward to enhance legitimate mobility and increase security of the travellers. This is modern practice, and I know that our Russian partners are equally looking at such possibilities.

As of today, we all have exactly 90 days to fine-tune and finalise our preparations for the VIS roll-out. But it is not 90 days per 180 days, as a Schengen short stay is defined, but 90 per 90 full working days to ensure that the roll-out will be as smooth as possible on 14 September 2015 – be it in Perm, Saratov, Omsk or elsewhere in Russia.

The VIS has been introduced since 2011 in already 16 regions, and region number 17 [*Eastern Partnership countries*] will follow next week. We draw from the existing experiences, but at the same time we understand that Russia poses a particular

challenge. This is not only because of the high number of Schengen visas issued here, which I mentioned earlier, but also in terms of the geographical size of the country.

The Schengen countries have made remarkable efforts to enable people from different parts of Russia to travel to Europe. In one way or another, Schengen consulates are nowadays present in almost 40 cities across the Russian territory. However, many people remain concerned about access to consular services, in particular as the fingerprinting obligation obviously necessitates personal appearance of the traveller upon first application.

On the other hand, after 14 September the conditions will be more conducive for *bona fide* travellers to acquire more easily Schengen visas with a long validity. Such travellers could also benefit from a more effective processing of applications. This is because all Schengen Consulates-General will share a protected common database with applicants' visa history and correct use of previous visas, and because fingerprinting – which will be very quick, simple and discreet – will allow for a more reliable identification of the applicants. Already now, 60% of all Schengen visas issued in Russia are multiple-entry visas. We should also remember that fingerprints will be stored in the VIS database for five years, during which personal appearance is not normally

required, and that other conditions of visa issuance remain unchanged.

At any rate, these kinds of issues merit further discussions during the course of today amongst this professional group of people. In view of the roll-out in September, it will be also very important to ensure an effective and positive information campaign. Such an information campaign, to which you everyone should contribute, can usefully highlight the benefits of the VIS and clarify its practical repercussions to the future visa applicants.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I look forward to constructive discussions on the VIS roll-out and hearing about the outcomes of your reflections. 90 days is a sufficiently long time to make sure that those Russian citizens, who want to contribute to their own happiness by travelling to Europe, can continue to do so as easily as possible.

Thank you for your attention.