



European Youth Forum Strategy Paper

ON THE REMOVAL OF VISA OBSTACLES TO YOUTH MOBILITY IN EUROPE

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Introduction

A barrier-free Europe is one of the real aims of the European Youth Forum. Only if the mobility of European citizens, especially young people, is guaranteed, human rights in Europe will be fulfilled. Unfortunately, the aim is not fulfilled, and reality is far from the optimal. This also includes the legal framework and documentation on which visa procedures are based. Therefore, the European Youth Forum and its member organisations have been tackling the problem and raising awareness on it. The European Youth Forum recognises the scale of the problem, and as one tool in the process, it adopted at its COMEM in spring 2004 a paper on "Guidelines for the removal of legal obstacles to Mobility in Youth Work ¹".

Abolishing the visa requirements for young people active in youth work is an important step in creating a barrier-free Europe. Unfortunately the aims are not expected to be achieved in the near future, and therefore, actions in reforming the current systems are urgently needed. The European Youth Forum and its member organisations consider the artificially created obstacles to mobility to contradict the aims of equal rights and non-discrimination. The European Youth Forum is committed to fight for equality, against discrimination and for the free movement of persons. In short - all different, all equal - is the principle the European Youth Forum follows and thereby urges the migration authorities (home and justice authorities, foreign affairs, aliens' offices, customs authorities, etc) to do the same.

It is necessary to start building up a common approach and partnership between the actors who are designing and implementing visa policies and young people who are affected by these policies and actions. Today, many young people travel daily to other countries because of their involvement in international youth work and their contribution to the development of European societies and European values. While governments have stated their support to civil society development and the promotion of active citizenship, thereby encouraging young people to volunteer and build a strong European identity, visa policies are completely in opposition to those ideals.

The mission of this paper is to define clear aims and actions needed to tackle artificially-created barriers to youth mobility in Europe, and specifically visa-related barriers. The paper highlights some of them and proposes urgent actions to be taken. The paper proposes first actions aimed at transparency, coherence and limiting the bureaucracy of visa and registration procedures. Some of the actions call for wider reforms inside the migration authorities by the respective governments, which require large-scale public support and awareness. The paper also underlines concrete actions that the European Youth Forum and its member organisations should conduct during the work plan mandate 2005-2006 and

¹ Youth work includes youth programmes, exchanges and other types of youth activities.

beyond. Finally, the paper proposes to raise awareness by ***an information and lobby campaign against visa barriers***.

Visa and registration procedures

Visa procedures are often unclear, time consuming, expensive and very bureaucratic. Extreme requirements such as proof of a large sum of money before travelling can make the visa application impossible, especially for young people involved in youth work coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Today young people active in youth work are hindered by the demand to buy a health insurance before a visa is issued.

Current systems recognise several categories of visas, such as business, tourism, and other. However, the visa system does not reflect an important category of users, different from the existing ones, namely youth workers and volunteers. Young people involved in youth work going abroad are caught in between the different categories without clear guidelines on the procedures. Often, when such situations arise the embassies use these guideline ambiguities against the applicants. There are examples where young people cannot participate in activities due to the fact that the embassy cannot issue either a short-term or long-term visa, since none of them satisfy the real purpose of the visa needed.

Visa application requirements of needed documentation differ from embassy to embassy even inside the Schengen area, which easily create more obstacles for an applicant. Visa application fees differ depending on the origin and/or colour of the passport and place of application. Young people volunteering for youth work should be supported by the hosting states and this should be done through issuing visas for free. In any case, embassies should not make profits on youth mobility. Today the same countries and their embassies that financially support youth work in different countries in Europe charge high fees to youth workers when the latter apply for visas abroad.

Besides the visa application itself, the registration in destination countries is as painful and time-consuming as the application, if not more, and it often limits the mobility during the process. This is not only a problem for applicants outside the Schengen area but also a reality for registration in the other countries of Europe.

The renewal of a visa should be possible in the country of temporary residence if such a need arises. Young people have had to travel to third countries where consulates are located in order to renew their stay, instead of doing it in the country itself. Youth workers should not need to follow such absurd rules while volunteering.

Today the Schengen area is not the reality of free movement inside this space. Countries limit entries and exits of applicants. Schengen visas should allow entries and exits in all member states of this space. In addition, while

having to pay for a full month, a youth worker would get a number of days within the period of the visa, limited exclusively to the time of the activity. Why should young people have to pay more than they are subjectively allowed to stay? What are young people supposed to do if there is a flight delay or cancellation upon return? Such restrictions are in contradiction with the aim of establishing the Schengen area.

Therefore the European Youth Forum demands:

- The establishing of Europe-wide common criteria for visas for young people involved in youth work.
- The establishing of easy and transparent visa application procedures, especially for young people involved in youth work.
- A standard and user-friendly form of invitations.
- A standard set of documents needed for applying for visa.
- A visa system where fees are abolished, or at least a system where the fee reflects only the cost related to issuing the visa.
- The establishing of easy and transparent registration procedures for both short- and long-term volunteers and employees in NGYOs.
- the right to multiple entry for youth workers with youth work visas, and if a visa is granted for a Schengen country, it should entitle the applicant to access the whole area.
- The renewability of visas in the host country, eliminating unnecessary expenses and reducing the waste of time.
- The creation by governmental institutions and national governments of a system where health-related costs are covered by the country hosting the volunteer.

Coherence

As a horizontal policy, youth policy should be coherent in common aspects related to visa regulations with foreign and migration policy. Unfortunately, when there is a contradiction between youth and other policies, youth policy is often overridden. In addition, while actively consulting on improving youth work and youth policies in Europe, including new generation and new priorities in youth programmes, the aspect of mobility of young people and the accessibility of those initiatives for young people in the whole of Europe should be taken into account.

The institutions of the European Union should not limit mobility to their own mobility programmes inside the Union. A wider definition of youth mobility should be realized, as its programmes claim. Today, while following the values enshrined in the EU Constitution, the EU YOUTH Programme is in contradiction with EU migration policies. The EU should eliminate such contradictions, in favour of the mobility of young people from all over Europe benefiting from its programmes and values. An economic and institutional union should not ignore the cultural and educational values of the whole of Europe. The European Youth Forum aims to create an accessible space for all young people to freely participate in youth work in Europe and is determined to realise this aim!

Therefore, the European Youth Forum demands:

- Coherent regulations in the field of migration and youth policy, in favour of youth policy, by all national and international actors;
- The Schengen regulations' observance of the aims of the EU's Youth policies;
- The adoption by the EU of a directive on coherence in the field of mobility;
- The inclusion of all countries of Europe in the Youth Programmes of the EU;
- Clear and coherent regulations on visa applications;
- Clear and easy registration procedures for youth work;
- The implementation of transparent visa application procedures for all people in Europe.

Transparency

Too often, visa procedures are unclear, non-transparent and confusing. From country to country visa requirements differ to a great extent. There are examples where requirements of two consulates representing the same country differ, or where single consultates require more documents than officially requested. Often, consulates require many more additional documents to be attached to the officially required package. Information about which documents are required changes from day to day and from person to person, which makes it almost impossible to provide correct documents for an effective handling of the visa application. Moreover, the applicant should be fully aware at all stages of the application processing.

As a general rule, the reasons for refusal are not communicated to the applicant. Coping with this system is even more difficult for young people

applying for visas, who do youth work on a voluntary basis, and therefore do not have either the time or the resources to follow the application process on a day-to-day basis.

In some countries the atmosphere among the migration authorities is hostile and the service for visa applicants suffers from this. In many countries, slow bureaucracy and corrupted officials force the applicants to use unofficial methods in order to secure fair treatment. In the European Youth Forum's view, young people should not be subject to rent-seeking.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum demands:

- Transparent and effective visa processing, easily accessible for everyone.
- A system based on clear regulations instead of a system based on civil servants' subjective choice.
- Written clarification to the applicant of the reasons for the denial of a visa.
- Irregularities concerning visas for young people involved in youth work (such as corruption, ignorance and discrimination) should be fought against.
- The right for applicants to appeal the visa decisions.
- The development by States of an accountability system for migration offices.
- The monitoring by States of the objective implementation of migration policies.
- The development by the Schengen area of an appeal and monitoring system for its visa processing, corresponding to EU values.

Awareness-raising

As an issue of critical importance to the European Youth Forum, artificially-created barriers to mobility shall not be left only for the migration officials at different levels in Europe. Therefore, awareness-raising of the current barriers is urgently needed.

The barriers to mobility should not be tackled in a narrow approach, but should also be reflected in all the policies connected to the movement of people. Mobility should be considered a horizontal priority. Therefore, the European Youth Forum should include an aspect of mobility in all its policies, and at the same time develop a broader debate with its member organizations on the visa issue. Consequently, the European Youth Forum

encourages its member organisations to tackle the problem of mobility seriously and to communicate the barriers they face and good solutions they have found concerning the obtaining of visas in order to develop best practices.

The European Youth Forum should also raise the issue of visa problems in the co-operation with its global partners (GCCC and ICMYO), sharing information on similar problems and establishing a common framework.

The European Youth Forum and its member organisations should be actively in contact with different government officials and inform them about problems in the current complicated situation. The European Youth Forum alone cannot achieve maximum visibility and understanding of the problem. Therefore an active participation of member organisations in awareness-raising and lobbying are of the greatest importance. The European Youth Forum will actively lobby on the issue in the negotiations with its institutional partners (EU, CoE, UN). The European Youth Forum should also actively develop contacts not only with the youth authorities within those institutions but also with the departments related to migration.

New forms of lobbying national migration authorities responsible for the visa systems and their embassies/consulates need to be developed. The European Youth Forum and its member organisations will develop such tools, in order to achieve maximum awareness of the growing mobility problem.

The European Youth Forum will conduct a survey among its member organisations on their experiences with visa and registration procedures. A visa transparency index will be developed based on the results of this survey, which will be used as a tool in the lobby actions towards the countries with higher obstacles.

The European Youth Forum will run an information and lobby campaign during 2005-2006, and develop a longer-term policy in this area. The European Youth Forum will investigate the possibility to run such a campaign in co-operation with its regional and institutional partners, and other relevant actors in the migration field.

In order to raise awareness for the issue, the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations commit themselves to:

- Develop a long-term strategy for achieving a barrier-free youth mobility;
- Lobby the European institutions and national governments to achieve a barrier-free Europe;
- Develop a large-scale information and lobby campaign targeting the European Youth Forum's vision on visa procedures;

- Develop a proposal for Europe-wide common criteria for visas for young people involved in youth work;
- Lobby European institutions and national governments in order to ease the visa applications procedures;
- Develop and publish a visa transparency index throughout Europe, and use this document as a lobby tool;
- The European Youth Forum will allocate more internal resources on the problem of mobility.

In the short term, the European Youth Forum commits itself to the following actions 2005-2006:

- Following up the issue of mobility in all other policy areas inside the European Youth Forum;
- Lobbying for decreasing mobility barriers:
 - mobilise member organisations to meet relevant actors (regional, institutional partners, embassies, ministries etc.) in member states;
 - raise the issue as a topic with regional partners, institutional partners (EU, CoE and UN) and embassies in Brussels;
 - Lobby for EU visa abolishing with all European countries;
 - Formulate the human rights dimension in lobby actions;
 - Direct actions towards politicians;
 - Actively participate in debates and give statements on visa problems when such statements are required;
 - Lobby for inclusion of a mobility dimension in the institutional partners policies;
 - Investigate the interest by partners for a wider international information and lobby campaign.
- Informing the public of the problem:
 - Raise awareness of the problem in the media;
 - Explain contradictory EU policies for the public;
 - Prepare a printout and an online version of a visa booklet;
 - Publish a visa transparency index with appropriate partners;
 - Launch a visa webpage on needs and changes in visa requirements (the European Youth Forum should create an information package on how to obtain a visa for its member organisations);
 - Collect and develop best practices in the field of mobility among member organisations and publish them on the web;
 - Organise public round tables on the issue;
 - Encourage member organisations to write about the issue in their own publications;

- Launch postcards on mobility.
 - Launch a European information and lobby campaign on the barrier-free mobility of young people.
- Investigate the possibilities to work with the insurance business to create low-cost insurance for volunteers.