

EU Trade Deal Increasingly Likely to Hinge on Czech Visas

Embassy – Anca Gurzu
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European Parliament resolution applies fresh pressure

A new European Parliament resolution has taken aim at Canada's decision to re-impose visa requirements on the Czech Republic two years ago, directly linking the issue with the ongoing Canada-EU trade talks.

While experts say that threat only amounts to political pressure at this point, even top officials acknowledge the visa issue remains a potential stumbling block and should not be dismissed.

In a March 8 declaration, members of the European Parliament expressed "solidarity with the unequal status of Czech citizens" and called on the European Commission and the European Council "to increase political pressure on Canada in order to set the earliest possible date for abolishing the visa regime for Czech citizens." The Parliament's document notes that any further "delay in the termination of the unequal status of Czech citizens could threaten the future ratification of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada."

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty gave the European Parliament more decision-making power, making it one of the key bodies to ratify trade agreements. But the trade deal between Canada and the EU would also have to be ratified by the European Council and national governments (for the latter, if the content of the deal falls within their competency).

Canada introduced the travel restrictions on the Central European country in July 2009 due to a spike in refugee claims, mostly from Czechs of Roma origin. The decision came less than two years after the government decided Czech citizens could travel without a visa to Canada.

EU Ambassador to Canada Matthias Brinkmann told Embassy there are indeed concerns over how Czech and European anger stoked by the visas could impact the trade deal. "The visa issue might become an even bigger problem once we have concluded the negotiations and the agreement has to be ratified," he said. "Then of course you never know what the Parliament and the Czech Republic will decide."

This echoes the findings of Canadian parliamentarians from the Standing Committee on International Trade who visited Europe in November. In their report, tabled in February, the committee members noted that although "sensitive issues" and "irritants" like the visa requirements are not part of the trade deal per se, they could affect its ratification.

Canadian officials have indicated the visa requirement will not be lifted before the end of 2011, when changes to Canada's refugee legislation comes into force, though no exact date has been set.

The European Parliament document also calls for the lifting of visa requirements on Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, the only other EU member states facing such restrictions when travelling to Canada.

Patrick Leblond, professor at the University of Ottawa's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, calls the linking of the visa issue with the trade agreement "fair game." "If I were the Europeans, I would also look at where I could get leverage," he said. "Canada stands to gain a fair amount from these negotiations and it would be a pity to scrap this deal on a visa issue." However, Mr. Leblond also said that sometimes issues get politicized and this is very much "a game of give and take."

In a written response, Czech Ambassador Karel Zebrakovsky said the European Parliament's declaration reflects the importance of the visa issue, since more than half of all parliamentarians supported it, from different countries and different political spectrums.

"It also confirms the well-known fact that the visa issue is not only an important bilateral, but multilateral Canada-EU issue," the ambassador wrote. Making at least some progress towards resolving the visa issue may be a prerequisite for some national parliaments for the ratification of certain agreements, Mr. Zebrakovsky said. He pointed to the air transport agreement Canada signed with the EU in 2009, whose ratification has been postponed by both chambers of the Czech Parliament.

Mr. Brinkmann called the link between the trade agreement and the Czech, Bulgarian and Romanian visas "a fact of life," especially because the three member states' trade with Canada is fairly small and a trade deal would not bear many fruits. "The...agreement is very important for Canada, very important for the EU [as a whole] – for the Czech Republic not so much," Mr. Brinkmann said.

Achim Hurrelmann, political science professor at Carleton University and an expert on European integration, echoed this thought. Since the EU is internally heterogeneous and not all member states are engaged in extensive trade with Canada, there is a potential for this issue to become a stumbling block for the deal. "If that's the case, [the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria] might be more willing to let the agreement not go through because of these unrelated issues, then if it was a country like the UK which trades quite heavily with Canada and therefore could expect many more economic benefits from the agreement," Mr. Hurrelmann said. This is scenario can gain even more legitimacy when dealing with emotional issues – and the visas are one of those, he said. The visa requirements appear discriminatory because Canadians do not have such travel restrictions through the whole of the EU.

Although the visa issue does not appear to be dangerous for the agreement right now, Mr. Hurrelmann said, "it would make sense for the Canadian government to take this seriously and see if there is any way to solve this Czech visa issue before the ratification of the deal."

A spokesperson for International Trade Minister Peter Van Loan wrote in an email that Canada's visa requirements are not affecting the free trade negotiations with the EU. "Canada recognizes the interest European Union citizens have in the visa question, and will work co-operatively with the European Commission and the EU's member states on these issues," Monika Bujalska said.