

Dear Ms. Smolijaninovaite,

Thank you very much for your email to President Barroso and HRVP Ashton of 31 October.

I have read with interest your email which covers the issue of visa and mobility - an issue which is at the center of the EU-Russia relationship and will be addressed at the upcoming EU-Russia Summit of 21 December.

I share your view that people-to-people contacts are key to advance the bilateral relationship as a whole. This is why the process of visa liberalisation as well as the upgraded Visa Facilitation Agreement are a priority in EU-Russia relations. As you write, the upgraded Visa Facilitation Agreement could benefit immediately many citizens on both sides of the border as well as civil society and business.

On the process of visa liberalisation, I would like to point out that the EU and Russia are currently implementing the "Common Steps towards visa free short-term travel" which were adopted at the Summit of December 2011. In one year, a lot of information has been exchanged and the Summit will be an opportunity to take stock of progress achieved so far. It is clear that this is a merit based technical exercise and that the EU is against any artificial deadlines.

On the upgraded Visa Facilitation Agreement, the EU stands ready to conclude the negotiations of the Visa Facilitation Agreement. This would also solve the problem of visa obligations for aircrew members from EU Member States that do not have a bilateral agreement with Russia since it is envisaged that the upgraded Visa Facilitation Agreement would cover aircrews. I hope that the Summit will provide the political impetus to move forward on this important agreement.

I look forward to your further contributions in this important area of the EU-Russia relationship.

Mit freundlichen Gruessen

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