

EU Proposes Simplifying Travel From Kaliningrad

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BRUSSELS — The European Commission has proposed making it easier for Kaliningrad residents to visit relatives and do business in the EU border region, the European Union executive said Friday.

Kaliningrad, which has a population of nearly 1 million, became the only such exclave within the EU when a 2004 EU enlargement brought in both Poland and Lithuania.

The European Commission has proposed allowing the states bordering Kaliningrad to negotiate bilateral agreements to make border crossings easier for people living within 30 to 50 kilometers of the EU frontier.

This would involve issuing special permits for regular crossings instead of visas, for which fees could be waived.

"All people living within the Kaliningrad enclave will enjoy the benefits of this amendment," commission spokesman Michele Cercone said. "Usually they have the necessity for family,

cultural or economic reasons to move across the border quite often; sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for a few days."

Implementing the proposal will require discussion and approval by EU member states and the European Parliament.

"Treating the entire Kaliningrad area as a border area will prevent an artificial division of that region and will facilitate and enhance economic and cultural interchange," a commission statement said.

Kaliningrad was originally called Königsberg and was part of Prussia and then Germany before being annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and its German population forced out.

The Baltic Sea port is geographically separated from the rest of Russia and bordered by Lithuania and Poland.

The EU and Russia have been discussing scrapping visas, but talks have moved slowly due to concerns among some EU states that this could spark a surge of illegal immigration from Russia and other former Soviet republics whose citizens already have the right to travel to Russia without visas.

Four similar local border traffic agreements are already in force, covering Hungary and Ukraine, Slovakia and Ukraine, Poland and Ukraine and Romania and Moldova.

Others covering Poland and Belarus, Latvia and Belarus, Lithuania and Belarus, and Norway and Russia are expected to enter into force soon.

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