

# Visa Rules Set to Be Eased in Central Asia

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June 14, 2012



Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan plan to abolish visas for travelers from certain countries. Above, passports of various nations, including Denmark, top right; New Zealand, top middle; and the United States, bottom right.

The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are planning to liberalize their visa rules this summer, marking what looks like a trend among former Soviet states.

The Kyrgyz parliament approved a bill Thursday that would unilaterally scrap visas for citizens of 44 countries, including almost all European countries and the United States, for stays up to 90 days, [according](#) to local media reports.

According to a [statement](#) by the Kyrgyz Economics Ministry posted on the parliament's website, the law is meant to attract more tourists and foreign investment to the country.

The bill has yet to be signed by President Almazbek Atambayev.

Up to this point, Kyrgyzstan has allowed most foreign travelers to buy a visa on arrival at the airport in the capital, Bishkek. The fee starts at \$40 for a 15-day stay, [according](#) to the Kyrgyz foreign ministry's website.

Scrapping the visas would mean that the foreign ministry loses \$5 million in annual revenue, the [knews.kg](#) news site reported. But Kyrgyz officials argue that a boost in tourists alone would more than compensate for this.

Foreign tourists spend \$100 per day on average during their stay in the country. Given that tourists usually stay an average 10 days in the country and that 10 percent of their expenditure is taxes, the Kyrgyz budget would get \$100 per foreign tourist, the economics ministry said in the statement.

Tajikistan has a similar regime, allowing Western visitors to buy short-term single-entry visas at the airport in Dushanbe, but the country's lower house of parliament last month approved a bill that would permit visa-free visits by U.S. and EU citizens as well as citizens of some Southeast Asian countries, local media reported.

It was unclear Thursday when the Tajik bill might become law.

Kazakhstan, the region's economic powerhouse, is also planning a visa-free regime, but only for tourists who are citizens of countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The group's 34 members include most EU countries, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Chile, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev said last month that the Kazakh Foreign Ministry was considering lifting visa requirements for these countries.

"In order to support the development of tourism, this question is being considered," he was quoted as saying by the [Bnews.kz](#) news site.

An official from the country's Industry Ministry said earlier this week that the plan is part of a wider project to boost the country's image abroad.

Also planned are tours for foreign journalists, publicity films about Kazakhstan, a new tourism website and joint presentations with the country's foreign missions, the official, Kuat Tanyzbayev, was quoted as saying by the [kursiv.kz](#) news site.

Kazakh officials have expressed frustration that their country's image is largely shaped by Sacha Baron Cohen's satirical film "Borat," which mercilessly lampooned the country as hopelessly backward and bigoted.

A source in the Kazakh embassy confirmed on Thursday that such a plan existed but said that it was not clear when it would come into force.

"The latest plan is for July 1," the source said, requesting anonymity because he was not

authorized to speak to the media.

While Kazakhstan has simplified its visa rules recently, the country still requires an invitation, which can make the process tricky, businessmen interviewed for this article said.

Ben Aris, the founder of BNE.eu, an investors' newsletter covering much of the region, said the Kazakh invitation rules are stricter than the Russian ones.

"They insist it comes from a real company," he said.

While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been relatively open to foreigners before, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan rank among the most difficult countries to get into.

For instance, Uzbekistan does not allow foreign journalists to work on its territory, and Turkmenistan requires visas for citizens of practically all other countries in the world.

Aris recalled that visa rules were dramatically tightened in Central Asia after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the 2005 massacre in the Uzbekistan city of Andijan.

"In the 1990s, most borders were largely open," he said.

If the changes become law, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would join Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia among former Soviet countries that have unilaterally dropped visa requirements for Western visitors.

Full visa-free travel with much of Europe is in place for the three Baltic states — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — which are part of the Schengen border-free zone.

These examples contrast with Russia and Belarus, which retain cumbersome invitation and registration requirements for citizens of most Western countries.

Armenia and Azerbaijan still require visas, and Azerbaijan has recently made the process of getting them more difficult and expensive.

Talks between Moscow and the EU about abolishing visas have yet to begin. However, a facilitation agreement with the United States is expected to be ratified by the State Duma soon.

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