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POSITION PAPER

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DELAYS IN VISA APPROVAL FOR EU TRADE FAIRS

The European Exhibition Industry

- **welcomes the recovery of all international trade fairs and business events in Europe with increasing participation from extra-EU countries**
- **registers substantial delays in visa approval for exhibitions in several EU countries, and especially for Germany**
- **calls for increasing capacities and speeding up business visa approval processes, specifically for trade fairs and other business events**
- **expects support from the national and EU institutions to maintain market share of globally leading events in Europe, particularly in Germany, and to leverage the potential of extra-EU exhibitors and visitors**

Complaints about crunch in visa appointments and approval in major source markets as China, India, Pakistan and Türkiye to EU countries

European organisers of major international trade fairs and global conferences in Europe experience a growing problem with delays in visa appointments and approvals in the major sourcing markets, mainly in China, India, Pakistan and Türkiye. The European Exhibition Industry Alliance receives a myriad of single cases and generic complaints from its members. There is endless anecdotal evidence for delays that lead to exhibitors not being able to send their staff to the exhibition in Europe, thus losing money on their booked stand, as well as visitors missing out the opportunity to visit and buy at exhibitions in Europe.

The problem seems especially virulent for Germany, but not only. Customers, subsidiaries and foreign representatives of the major German trade fairs organisers report considerable difficulties of their customer in applying for trade fair visas in numerous countries. In the most important overseas volume markets China and India, visa appointments are only available - if at all - within weeks or months of lead time.

Due to the lack of appointment options on the websites of the embassy and consulates general in China, many exhibitors opt to buy expensive appointments from illegal "brokers" in order not to jeopardise their presence at the fair. We also hear that Schengen visa may have been applied for via other EU countries, whose bottlenecks are a bit less significant, implying complicated travel via the other chosen EU country, more time and higher costs for the companies.

Why is this so important for the exhibition industry?

The **European** Exhibition industry is a **global leader**. It hosts the majority of all leading international B2B and B2C trade fairs. European trade fairs attract businesses from within the EU and all around the world. They provide a maximum of business opportunities in one place, enabling EU companies to meet potential business partners and customers without travelling outside the EU.

Within Europe, Germany is the leading country. Two thirds of the world's leading trade fairs are held in Germany. There are around 70 trade fair venues, four of the ten largest exhibition centres in the world are located in Germany. On average, 380 trade fairs are held in Germany each year. These trade fairs attract over 235,000 exhibiting companies and 16 million visitors. 60 percent of the exhibiting companies and 35 percent of the trade visitors at the international trade fairs come from abroad.

Now, the problematic situation with delayed visa approval is extremely threatening for these leading international trade fairs.

In the best case, these deficits lead to inefficiencies in the visa process, "deviations" on the exhibitor and visitors side to other EU countries and substantial additional burdens on the representatives or subsidiaries of the trade fairs organisers in the visa markets which support the customers with their visa requests. Realistically, however, they also lead to European organisers losing business by not being able to exploit the customer potential (both on the exhibitor and visitor side) and thus to considerable competitive disadvantages for the leading trade fairs.

Even worse than the short-term financial loss is the strategic damage caused by the threat of losing their status as the world's leading trade fair. It harms Europe's and particularly Germany's reputation as *the* exhibition country and the single exhibition's reputation with it. Business people and companies from the above mentioned countries tend to search for alternative events outside of Europe.

The Middle East can attract many of these to its growing exhibition market. Not only a short term but a final **shift in market shares** will be the consequence – along with all negative effects on the European economy, its businesses, its leadership in innovation, its export industries and the missed economic effects of the trade fairs or other business events activity on the cities and regions in Europe.

It is particularly ironic that - after having survived the pandemic as one of the hardest hit sectors – in the exact moment when international business is able and keen to

come back to Europe, we cannot provide these important clients the welcome they deserve. We make them wait so they turn away and look at other markets.

Not only do European exhibitions and other business events have more difficulties to get back to their pre-pandemic strength. They **lose reputation** and **business** on both the exhibitors and visitors/buyers side. In the mid-term, it harms the **quality** of the events which become less attractive to the European clients, too.

We believe that it is in the very own interest of the EU and the Member States, especially Germany, to sustain a thriving exhibition industry, and particularly at this crucial moment in the **digital and sustainable transition**. Trade fairs help to bring innovation to the markets, incite change, spread new technologies widely and help implement change in depth and at large in a short time. The existing attractive market platforms must not be jeopardised.

It is equally important to remind that most **exhibition and conference centres in Europe are in public hands** and the cities and regions benefit largely from the activity and its economic impact. It should be a priority to the Member States to not impede but to foster the exhibition and business events business by providing smooth services to Europe's business visitors.

How can the situation be improved?

EEIA has raised the issue with the European Commission and with selected MEPs. The German Association of the Exhibition Industry AUMA has been signalling this problem to the German government at all levels. On the practical level, single trade fair organisers are in contact with the embassies or consulates in the most affected countries. However, with no satisfying proposals for troubleshooting or long-term remedy so far.

A simple suggestion to save time and reduce complexity is to **waive the invitation letter for the trade fair visa** where it is obligatory, the purpose of the requested travel and its absolute necessity can be derived clearly from the participation to the trade fair as reason of travel. Further, **simplification of procedures, sufficient staff** to comply with the demand and offering **separate dates for appointments** for the exhibition visa applications while keeping an eye on the requested trade fair dates would help to soften the situation.

In case the diplomatic staff on site cannot cope with peak situations, perhaps a **centralised pool of visa specialists** may support these embassies and consulates. Besides, **coordination** of EU Member States capacities in the respective countries and supporting each other in situations of high demand could be another option.

EEIA explicitly welcomes the announced political agreement between the European Parliament and the Council on the **digitalisation of the Schengen visa procedure**. While the agreed rules will modernise, simplify, and harmonise the visa procedures for non-EU country nationals applying for a visa for the Member States, the planned transition period of seven years to join the platform, does not provide any help in the current critical situation.

Therefore, we urge the German government, all EU Member States governments as well as the EU institutions to work on a substantial improvement in a collaborative way and fast.

We believe it is worth a joint political effort to improve this situation quickly and substantially for the benefit of Europe as a whole – our reputation and attractiveness as a modern and leading economic space, its innovation and competitiveness, its leading role in the twin transition, trade in general and the platforms for knowledge exchange and trade in Europe.

Background Information

About EEIA

The European Exhibition Industry Alliance represents nearly 400 European exhibition organisers and venue operators in Brussels to the European institutions and stakeholders. These trade fairs and exhibition players are organised in UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry and the European Major Exhibition Centres Association EMECA.

For more information please visit:

www.exhibition-alliance.eu www.ufi.org www.emeca.eu

We look forward to receiving any queries and your positive reply.

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