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Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport

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Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda

**International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods,
1982 (Harmonization Convention)**

Issues in the application of the Convention

Visa facilitation for professional drivers

Transmitted by the International Road Transport Union

Visa facilitation for professional drivers

Introduction

Professional drivers play an indispensable role in the development of foreign trade and tourism in a globalised world. As part of their work, and when entering the territory of a foreign state, visas are needed.

Slow and bureaucratic visa issuance procedures regularly involving the physical presence of driver applicants, the multiplication of untransparent intermediary services that result in additional costs and bureaucracy, the submission of a high number of supporting documents, the restricted issuance of annual or longer multi-entry visas, limitations on the use of issued visas, insufficient duration of stay limits, drivers age limits related to visa issuance not only causes economic losses at macro, company level and transport operators' level, but also limits market access by transport operators, contrary to the principles and legal provisions on free trade and personal mobility, and restricts the individual right to work.

Visa issuance for professional drivers is largely subject to bilateral agreements on visas. Unlike seafarers, professional drivers do not enjoy special global arrangements for issuance of visas or international transport. In some countries, there is no specific visa category for professional drivers. The difficulties for professional drivers to obtain a visa is widely known and recognised, and consolidated action is urgently needed.

Reasoning for the involvement of the Global Forum

The decision of the 86th Annual Session of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC) to change the name of the (WP.30) Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport to “Global Forum on Customs questions affecting transport including border crossing facilitation” and to amend its Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedures, allows the Global Forum to increase topical work, specifically the implementation of the Harmonization Convention and the facilitation of visas for professional drivers.

A specific reference to visa facilitation is made in the Harmonization Convention, Annex 8, entitled: “Facilitation of border crossing procedures for international road transport” – Article 2.1.: “The Contracting Parties should endeavour to facilitate the procedures for the granting of visas for professional drivers engaged in international road transport in accordance with national best practice for all visa applicants and national immigration rules as well as international commitments.”

Industry position

To address the issue, IRU suggests that professional drivers are recognised as essential workers deserving a priority, facilitated visa treatment.

Specifically, IRU recommends harmonising the number of visa application documents and abolishing unnecessary ones such as the invitation letter, which would make the process of obtaining visas more streamlined, uniform and transparent.

In addition, to facilitate the effectiveness of visa procedures, IRU calls on governments to issue multi-entry, long-term visas to professional drivers. Furthermore, and in the long term, governments are encouraged to work on introducing digital visas (e-visas).

Proposed way forward

- With reference to the Harmonisation Convention Article 2.2., “Contracting Parties agree to regularly exchange information on best practices with regard to the facilitation of visa procedures for professional drivers”, IRU recommends that visa issues and best practices are presented by national governments at the next Global Forum meeting.

- With a view to facilitating the application process, governments are encouraged to develop harmonised visa application procedures and a recommended, minimum list of documents that are needed to apply for a visa.
- IRU encourages governments to discuss visa facilitation solutions, taking into consideration the TIR system's robust security measures. One suggestion is to use the information on transport companies from the International TIR Data Bank (ITDB), and also national association databases of TIR drivers as a visa facilitating tool.
- Governments are encouraged to envisage a visa facilitation pilot project for TIR transport operators and share the results with the Global Forum for further improvement.
- Governments are invited to create a dedicated multi-stakeholder Task Force within the Global Forum to address visa-related challenges for professional drivers. This Task Force would engage in intensive discussions over the next 1-2 years, culminating in well-informed proposals which would be submitted to the Forum for decision.
