



DHS Signs Visa Waiver Program Interim Declaration with Bulgaria



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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
Contact: 202-282-8010

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff signed today a Visa Waiver Program (VWP) interim declaration with Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin. The security enhancements outlined in the declaration continues Bulgaria's progress on the path toward visa-free travel to the U.S., and possible designation as a VWP member.

"I commend the Republic of Bulgaria for its commitment to these enhancements and our shared values of freedom and security," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "I look forward to the day when we greet the first visa-free travelers from Bulgaria on our soil."

The VWP has been authorized by U.S. law for over 20 years, with 27 current members from Asia and Europe. The U.S. Congress authorized DHS in August 2007 to reform the VWP and strengthen the security arrangements required of existing participant countries, as well as to expand the conditions for aspiring countries to join the program.

The security enhancements outlined in the interim declaration represent important progress toward meeting the requirements of the modernized VWP. They include, better information sharing about international travel and border screening, improvements in information exchange on known and suspected terrorists, timely and comprehensive reporting of lost and stolen passports, developing an air marshals program, and expanding operations for U.S. Federal Air Marshals.

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Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Republic of Bulgaria Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev at Visa Waiver Program Interim Declaration Signing



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Secretary Chertoff: Well, Prime Minister Stanishev and Foreign Minister Kalfin, thank you for joining us and thank you for being present at this very, very auspicious and important ceremony.

We are delighted to welcome you to visit us here at the Department of Homeland Security. We're even more delighted to praise the tremendous relationship of ongoing cooperation and commitment to the shared principles of freedom and security, which both of our countries have.

Obviously, the ability to sign this agreement leading on a path to a secure visa waiver program is a milestone in the relationship between our countries. And we appreciate Bulgaria's support for the visa waiver program initiative, recognizing that it is both has a convenience and a travel benefit, but also an important security benefit.

As I know you all know, under a law passed by the U.S. Congress last year at the urging of the President, we are pursuing two important goals with respect to the visa waiver program -- expanding the program to include additional countries which are strong allies and friends of the United States, and at the same time enhancing the security features of the visa waiver program for all countries who participate in the program.

Under the law passed by Congress, all existing or aspiring visa waiver programmers are required to carry out the kinds of cooperative elements that are laid out in the agreement we've signed and the interim declaration we've signed today. And today's declaration's is an important step, but it's still only one step toward realizing these goals.

The interim declaration outlines multiple security enhancements, including required exchange of information on known or suspected terrorists, reporting of lost and stolen passports, developing an air marshal program and allowing our air marshals to operate on direct flights, and of course there are other requirements such as having secure passports and things of that sort.

I also want to emphasize that we're respectful of the fact that with regard to those issues that fall within the domain of the European Union, obviously we deal with the European Union on those matters. But we're also gratified that the European Union recognizes the need for bilateral arrangements on matters with a national competency, and particularly on the technical implementation of a lot of these measures.

Those matters that fall within national responsibilities will be obviously implemented with national authorities, and any that fall within EU responsibility will be dealt with through the EU authorities.

We want to continue to work collaboratively with our international partners as we enter into agreements with other new and aspiring VWP countries, and we very much look forward to the day when Bulgaria is able to achieve visa waiver status, meet all the requirements, and we welcome the first Bulgarian into the United States without a visa. That will be a very, very important milestone in the relationship between our countries.

And we also look forward to continuing to work with other nations, including others in Europe, to increase and expand our visa waiver program, but without compromising the security which benefits all of us.

So, Prime Minister, if you --

Prime Minister Stanishev: Thank you.

Prime Minister Stanishev: Well, thank you very much, Secretary Chertoff, ladies and gentlemen. It is indeed a very important moment for our bilateral relations. I can say that in the recent years the cooperation between the United States and Bulgaria have developed into a real strategic partnership in many areas, in international relations, in addressing new common threats for our security, and in security issues.

And I think that today's declaration is indeed a very important milestone in the process which Bulgaria is following and participating to come to successful ending with being part of the visa waiver program, which is very important for our citizens, and will be, I think a very clear example of the new level of relations between the peoples of Bulgaria and the United States.

This is actually the most clear example of our trust, of our confidence to each other. We all have common interests in security areas. We all have common responsibilities in this area. We have a way to go in order to accomplish what we are starting today, and I must say that today's declaration was possible with the very active work in the recent months and weeks of the teams of the Homeland Security Department and the Bulgarian institutions, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, in order to come to this declaration, which is indeed a very important step.

We have the ambition to do our common work until hopefully the end of the year, in order to come to the next stage, will be a memoranda. And I must say that we have all of the preconditions. Of course, I can mention that the number of rejections for visa for Bulgarian citizens has been dramatically reduced in the recent years.

When Ambassador Beyrle started his mandate in Sofia, it was about 20 percent. Now it is a little below 14, as I'm aware, which is great progress. And we have to continue these efforts to be successfully accomplished. The Bulgarian government is working also on the new biometrical passports which are an important precondition for the visa waiver program to be implemented for Bulgaria, and we are aware of this.

But the important thing today is the very important message to the Bulgarian citizens from the government of the United States that Bulgaria is seen as trustful allies, that Bulgarian citizens are welcome to travel to the United States, and that we shall continue to successfully accomplish this goal.

Thank you very much.

Secretary Chertoff: Well said. Well said.

Prime Minister Stanishev: Thank you.

Secretary Chertoff: Do you want to take a couple of questions?

Prime Minister Stanishev: Yes, if there are.

Question: Secretary Chertoff, when can we expect the signing of memorandum on the visa waiver program basically?

Secretary Chertoff: You mean the next stage? Obviously, if you look at the declaration there are some additional milestones that need to be met, so I don't like to, you know, set deadlines or, you know, make predictions of timeframes. We're going to work hard to make sure we can implement all these, and the sooner the better.

Question: Mr. Secretary, this proposal as well as existing agreements and other MOUs talk about the exchange of information about persons known to be -- known or suspected to be terrorists. As you know, the terror watch list contains tens of thousands of names, nicknames, aliases. How in practice does this work? Is this a wholesale delivery of the terror watch list, or does the U.S. maintain custody of the list and check names at the request of these countries?

Secretary Chertoff: No. We don't wholesale deliver the list over. Exchange of information is, you know, if there's somebody that is coming in that we need to know something about, we can get that information. We can also be requested to give information, but it's not -- we don't turn over custody of our whole watch list.

All right? Thank you.

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