The Role of the UNWTO in Visa Facilitation: 
The Diverse Impacts on Tourism Industries 
of China, Russia and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, many destinations made substantial improvements in their visa rules and procedures as reflected in the reports, as prepared by the UNWTO. This article first argues that the impact of the UNWTO on state behaviour in visa liberalization has become more significant in relation to the convergence of state’s interests that are constrained with the conditions in the international environment, such as financial crises; and global political ties embodied within the international forums, such as the G20. Second, analysing the diverse impacts of the changing rules and procedures applied in visa policies on tourism indicators in the selected countries, this article argues how different rules and procedures produce different policy outcomes in tourist visas; and how this diversity generates different tourism indicators. The article suggests more diverse visa facilitation techniques (i.e., Turkey) to boost the impact of visa facilitation on inbound tourism (i.e., China and Russia).

KEYWORDS

China, G20, Russia, Turkey, UNWTO, Visa Facilitation/Liberalization, Visa Policies

INTRODUCTION

The UNWTO identifies visa policies as one of the most significant procedures that affects tourism development around the globe (WEF, 2013). It has historically included visa policies as a major player affecting tourism growth; in 1963, at the United Nations Conference on International Travel and Tourism, “the dependency of tourism development on the actions of governments” was stressed, particularly in relation to the facilitation of “governmental formalities for international travel” (UNWTO, 1964). Since the 1990s, the UNWTO has actively been working on the creation of a policy platform to facilitate visa policies in tourism (i.e., Silk Road Program). In 2012, at the UNWTO/World Travel Market Ministers’ Summit in London, visa procedures and policies still reigned as among the most important barriers to travel and tourism (UNWTO Visa Openness Report, 2014, p. 15). Nevertheless, according to the UNWTO 2015 Visa Openness Report, many destinations showed remarkable and substantial improvements in visa requirements in 2015. In 2008, an average of 77% of the world’s population required a traditional visa; in 2015 it decreased significantly to 61% (63% in 2012 and 62% in 2014, respectively) (UNWTO Visa Openness Report, 2016).

Utilizing the epistemic communities1 approach, this article aims to probe two main questions. First, what are the changing parameters and conditions to better understand the role of UNWTO in visa facilitation? In the 1990s, the allocation of UN funds indicated a move from political and security priorities of the General Assembly in the direction of more technical roles of specialized agencies (Haas, 1992). Providing an insight to the UNWTO’s initiatives during G20 meetings in the 2000s enables us to understand how the impact of the UNWTO on state behaviour in visa liberalization
becomes more significant in relation to the convergence of state’s interests that are constrained with the conditions in the international environment, such as financial crises; and global political ties embodied within the international forums, such as the G20. Second, how do the changing rules and procedures applied in visa policies create the diverse impacts on tourism industries in the selected countries? This analysis is exemplified with three country cases (of China, Turkey and Russia) in order to compare their different levels of visa liberalization and also to show how the effect of diverse visa regimes is reflected in their tourism indicators.

The selection of China, Russia and Turkey as case countries is based on the following criteria. They are among the top tourist receiving destinations; also identified as emerging economies; and members of the G20. In regards to their facilitation level, they can be characterized with different visa regimes with a different pattern of development. According to the OECD Report (2014), China and Russia are identified as key emerging markets with governments which are progressively aligning their marketing strategies with visa policies to stimulate growth (p. 36). Turkey is also one of the top tourist receiving destinations, applying an e-visa program since 2013. Therefore, the analysis of the national visa policies of these countries in terms of their inbound tourism is significant as they have been exemplified as top tourist receiving destinations.

China, Russia, and Turkey have been designated as tourist generating destinations by developed countries such as Australia, France, New Zealand, Poland, and the United States. Their visa restrictions scores are therefore going to pale in comparison as developed countries enjoy more freedom of movement and larger scores of tourists flock to them. The Visa restriction index ranks countries according to “the travel freedom that their citizens enjoy” (Henley and Partners, 2015, p. 1)². China has the lowest score with visa-free access to 49 countries, ranking as 90ᵗʰ (in 2008, 18, ranked as 178ᵗʰ); Russia and Turkey, who have the higher scores with visa-free access to 102 countries, rank as 49ᵗʰ (Henley and Partners, 2015; Van der Burg, 2006; quoted from Whyte, 2008) (Figure 1).
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