

The Virgin Islands Consortium

EU Raises Eyebrows Over Dominica's Citizenship Sales Amid Broader Caribbean Review

Caribbean / **Published On October 25, 2023 06:26 AM /**

Staff Consortium **October 25, 2023**



The European Commission has advocated for a comprehensive review of the regulations governing "golden passports" that grant holders visa-free access to the European Union. This comes in the wake of revelations that five Caribbean nations, including Dominica, have collectively sold 88,000 of these passports. Dominica alone accounted for 34,500 sales.

Golden passports have recently been under intense scrutiny. A report published on Wednesday proposed multiple changes to the European Parliament, most notably, a modification to make it more straightforward for the EU to suspend visa-free travel for countries selling citizenships to overseas applicants.

Currently, the EU has a "suspension mechanism" in place that lets member states temporarily withhold visa-free travel for specific nations, especially if there's a surge in irregular migration or perceived security threats. But given the potential risks associated with citizenship-by-investment (CBI) programs — including threats to public policy, organized crime infiltration, money laundering, tax evasion, and corruption — the Commission aims to facilitate the visa suspension process.

EU Home Affairs Commissioner, Ylva Johansson, expressed concerns on Thursday about countries that are selling passports at relatively low prices to individuals who could pose security risks to the EU.

This regulatory review followed closely on the heels of the release of "Dominica: Passports of the Caribbean", a collaborative investigation between the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the Government Accountability Project, and various media outlets. The investigation unveiled that Dominica has, for years, been selling its citizenship with minimal oversight. Disturbingly, certain recipients of this citizenship had previously been investigated or even imprisoned for crimes. Some even turned fugitives in their home nations after acquiring their new Dominican documents.

While not all holders of these passports are engaged in criminal activities — many are past and present government officials with no allegations against them — their status as "politically exposed persons" warrants more in-depth examination.

The European Commission report emphasized that Caribbean CBI schemes lack rigorous tracking of applicants. Furthermore, the five Caribbean states of Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and Dominica offer options to alter identity post acquiring citizenship through investment. Coupled with a low rejection rate and swift processing time, concerns have been raised regarding the security screening's efficacy.

The exact timeframe within which Dominica issued the 34,500 passports, as mentioned in the Commission's report, remains uncertain. However, this number significantly surpasses the 7,700 names found in the island's public gazettes from 2007 to 2022. These gazettes are expected to be the official record of new passport recipients.

Further investigations by the OCCRP and the Guardian indicated discrepancies in the number of passports Dominica reportedly issued and the revenue they declared from naturalization fees between mid-2016 to mid-2022. The European Union's findings seem to corroborate suspicions that Dominica has underreported the issuance of numerous passports.

Recently, the U.K. introduced visa requirements for travelers from Dominica, pointing to blatant misuse of the CBI system.

Neither Dominica's government nor its Prime Minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, responded to several inquiries from OCCRP and its partners prior to the publication of the investigation. Skerrit, after being presented with detailed questions, held press briefings in which he baselessly alleged international journalists of receiving payments from his political adversaries. He further equated these journalists to "terrorists."

In its call for legislative changes regarding visa-free entry, the European Commission stressed that easy access to the EU should not be commercialized by nations offering citizenship in exchange for investments. The report further suggested that the EU should be equipped to suspend visa exemptions for any third country operating a CBI scheme without a genuine link to that country.

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