

With Covid-19 Easing, Diplomats Urge Biden to Lift ‘Unfair’ Ban on European Travelers

‘We raise this in every official meeting’; Biden administration has offered no plan to reopen borders

By Jessica Donati and Courtney McBride
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WASHINGTON—European diplomats and **business groups** are urging President Biden to lift the 15-month-old ban on travel from Europe and the United Kingdom after [both began accepting American travelers](#), saying the lack of reciprocity hinders economic recovery and separates families.

The ban, instituted by President Trump near the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic, has [hampered the operations of businesses](#) that need European workers in the U.S., diplomats in Washington said. The EU earlier this month began permitting travel from the U.S. Americans can also visit the U.K. with stringent testing and quarantine rules. “We raise this in every official meeting,” one European diplomat said.

Another diplomat said: “The current system is self-evidently unfair and is still based on the Covid situation of over a year ago.”

Additionally, tens of thousands of [Europeans who hold visas to work](#) or study in the U.S. and could travel despite the ban are unable to do so because of processing backlogs at U.S. embassies and consulates. Those already in the U.S. cannot visit their home countries because they cannot obtain the documents required to return.

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The Biden administration has said that it is following health officials' guidance and hasn't offered any details about a plan to reopen the borders to travelers from the EU and U.K.

"We have a working group with the European Union right now on this," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a German publication on Thursday. "I can't put a date on it."

In the meantime, European embassies in the U.S. have been flooded with appeals from citizens whose families have been separated for more than a year. **Business groups and other associations have also pleaded for their employees and families to be allowed to enter the U.S.**

"These people are indispensable for the management of thousands of companies, well beyond our membership, and are often key players in American organizations," said the Gruppo Esponenti Italiani, which includes Italian energy company [ENI SpA](#), bank [Unicredit SpA](#) and apparel maker [Benetton Group SRL](#). The EU's ambassador to the U.S., Stavros Lambrinidis, said the bloc wouldn't have opened its borders to U.S. travelers if it weren't safe.

"Both our regions, America and Europe, are built fundamentally on the notion of freedom of movement," he told The Wall Street Journal. "Covid came and upended this."

The French ambassador to the U.S. urged the Biden administration to take steps to ease the strain on families.

"We really hope that the U.S. will open soon to EU citizens, particularly in view of the difficult situation of Europeans legally established in the United States," Philippe Etienne said.

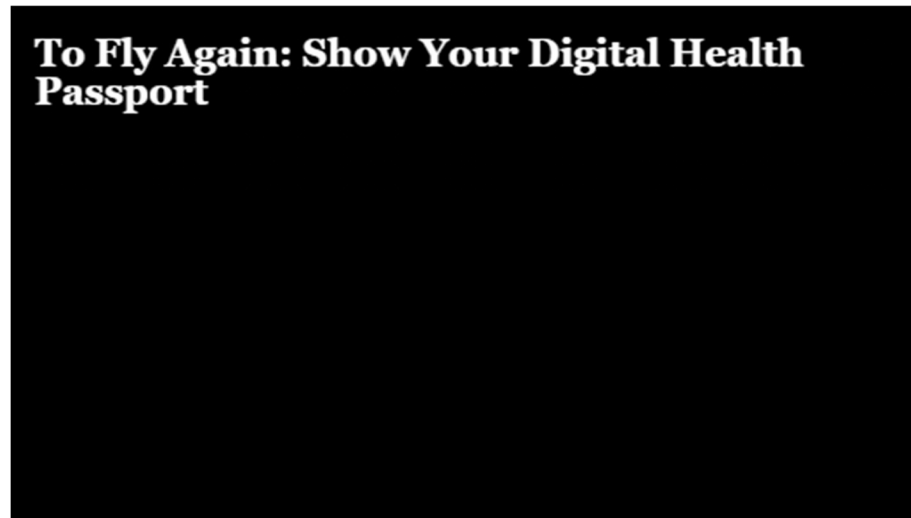
Former President [Donald Trump banned travel from the European Union and U.K.](#) in March 2020, when infection rates were surging on the continent but still relatively low in the U.S. The restrictions applied to any non-American present in those countries for the

two preceding weeks, with a few exceptions for people engaged to be married to U.S. citizens and certain classes of essential workers.

The Trump administration moved to lift the ban before leaving office, but [Mr. Biden said in January](#) that the U.S. wouldn't open up to Europe due to surging infection rates around the world, which lags behind the U.S. for vaccination coverage.

Hélène Langrognet, a French language teacher at the Washington International School who has lived and worked in the U.S. for four years, said the State Department approved her petition for a H-1B specialty occupation visa renewal in March 2020, but she has been unable to complete the renewal process with a required appointment at the U.S. Embassy in Paris.

Related Video:



Airports in Paris and Singapore as well as airlines including United and JetBlue are experimenting with apps that verify travelers are Covid-free before boarding. WSJ visits an airport in Rome to see how a digital health passport works. Photo credit: AOKpass (Originally published Feb. 1)

She hasn't left the U.S., where she continues to work, even to visit her elderly mother in France. While she can enter France, she would be unable to return to the U.S. The embassy has canceled four successive appointments, and her next is now scheduled for November 2021.

“Today, of course I can go to France if I need to, as I am a French citizen,” Ms. Langrognet said. “But I won’t be able to come back, and my work is here. I don’t want to lose my job, of course. My husband works here.”

Still, she said, “I am healthy, I have a job. It’s hard, but it’s not...tragic.”

A State Department official said the department remains committed to facilitating travel, but that the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with travel restrictions imposed by the White House, has substantially reduced its capacity to process visas.

Given the limitations, U.S. diplomatic posts have prioritized services for American citizens abroad and “mission-critical” visa services such as those for individuals aiding in the pandemic response.

Some European governments have proposed establishing a vaccine passport to facilitate safe travel, but the Biden administration has said the [U.S. wouldn’t create a centralized database of vaccine credentials](#).

Wall Street Journal Article Link:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-covid-19-easing-diplomats-urge-biden-to-lift-unfair-ban-on-european-travelers-11624715243>