

Brussels, 27 May 2010

European Commission proposes to waive the short-term visa requirement for the citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Aim of the proposal

The aim of the proposal is to simplify travel to the European Union countries participating in the common visa policy and those associated to the Schengen area for the citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, abolishing the obligation to apply for a short-term visa (up to 90 days) for the holders of biometric passports.

The proposal by the European Commission is the result of more than two years' work in the framework of the visa liberalisation dialogue which started with these two countries during the first semester of 2008.

History

In the context of the Western Balkans, the political objective of visa-free travel was set at the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003.

As a first step towards visa-free travel, the then European Community concluded visa facilitation and readmission agreements with **Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania**. Agreements entered into force in January 2008 (the readmission agreement with Albania already in May 2006).

In line with the Council conclusions of December 2007, visa liberalisation dialogues were opened with all five countries in the following months. These dialogues were based on fulfilment of requirements listed in detailed roadmaps. The implementation was regularly and thoroughly assessed by the European Commission assisted by Member States expert missions.

The progress allowed the lifting of visa obligation for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in December 2009.

Which countries are concerned by the proposal?

- All EU countries taking part in the EU visa policy: all EU countries except Ireland and the UK
- The countries associated to the Schengen area: Switzerland, Norway and Iceland

How was the evaluation carried out?

On the basis of roadmaps presented by the European Commission, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina have made significant progress in improving passport security, in strengthening border controls, in reinforcing the institutional framework to fight organised crime and corruption, as well as in external relations and fundamental rights.

Progress was monitored on a regular basis by the European Commission, including that based on input from technical missions carried out with the assistance of experts from Member States.

In April 2010 the European Commission carried out a thorough assessment of the progress achieved by Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was shared with the European Parliament, the Council and the authorities of the countries concerned. The conclusions allowed proceeding with a proposal to grant visa free travel to these two countries today. It is now for the European Parliament and EU Member States in the Council to decide to adopt the proposal in the coming months.

Will the Commission continue to assess the implementation of the open benchmarks?

A lot of progress has been made and only a limited number of requirements are still open. It is realistic to expect that these also will be met soon. As for Montenegro and Serbia in the proposal made in 2009 covering the three other countries, progress achieved was deemed sufficient for presenting a proposal, but it will only be adopted if and when all requirements are met.

In parallel with the examination of the proposal in the European Parliament and the Council, the Commission will continue to assess the implementation of the outstanding requirements for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina and it will share its assessment in a timely manner with the European Parliament and the Council. Expert missions will be necessary in order to verify progress made in the remaining requirements. The timing will have to be confirmed with the authorities of the countries concerned based on progress reported by them.

For Albania, the remaining open benchmarks relate to:

- the development of a strategy and policy to support the reintegration of Albanian returnees;
- the strengthening of capacities of law enforcement and the effective implementation of the legal framework for the fight against organised crime and corruption, including through the allocation of adequate human and financial resources;
- the effective implementation of the legal framework in the area of the confiscation of organised crime assets.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the remaining open benchmarks relate to:

- the strengthening of capacities of law enforcement and the effective implementation of the legal framework for the fight against organised crime and corruption, including through the allocation of adequate human and financial resources;
- the progressive implementation of the action plan from March 2010 on the establishment of electronic data exchange between police and prosecution bodies ;
- the harmonisation of entity level and Brcko district criminal codes with the state-level criminal code.

Is the Commission worried about the consequences of visa liberalisation in terms of increase in the numbers of asylum seekers in the EU?

At this stage the Commission considers that the problems that were faced by some EU countries in the last months as regards the increased numbers of asylum seekers were rather **isolated cases** due to manipulations and false information provided by certain smuggling networks to inhabitants of the poorest municipalities of some Balkan countries. The vast majority of these asylum applications were made out of economic interest.

The Commission has been working together with the authorities of the members States concerned to solve the situation also supporting a broader information campaign at local level to explain the limits of visa-free travel for short stays. In addition, the Commission will continue supporting actions and programmes aimed at the economic development of the less advanced regions of these countries.

In its contacts with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina the European Commission has systematically highlighted the need to take necessary measures to limit similar influxes of persons making unfounded asylum applications. The countries have responded in a quick and efficient way launching extensive public campaigns with the aim to properly explain to their citizens the significance of short-term visa-free travel and what it entails, in particular warning against misuse for purposes incompatible with visa-free travel.

What is the state of play regarding other citizens of the Western Balkans?

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

The citizens of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are exempted from the short-term visa obligation as from last year. The visa waiver applies as from 19 December 2009 to holders of biometric passports.

Kosovo

Regarding residents of Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99), in line with the Communication of November 2009 "Kosovo – fulfilling its European perspective", the Commission will continue to work closely with the Kosovo authorities, examine progress regarding readmission and reintegration issues and explore options for addressing the visa issue in the future.

Visa facilitation agreements - Overview of state of play AGREEMENTS IN FORCE

Country	Agreement signed	Entry into force
Russia	25 May 2006	1 June 2007
Ukraine	18 June 2007	1 January 2008
Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia*	18 September 2007	1 January 2008
Serbia*	18 September 2007	1 January 2008
Montenegro*	18 September 2007	1 January 2008
Bosnia and Herzegovina	18 September 2007	1 January 2008
Albania	18 September 2007	1 January 2008
Moldova	10 October 2007	1 January 2008

*Holders of biometric passports are exempt from the visa obligation since 19 December 2009

ONGOING/COMPLETED NEGOTIATIONS

Georgia: The European Commission proposed the conclusion of visa facilitation and readmission agreements on 5 May 2010

Cape Verde: Negotiations ongoing

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