

Visa liberalisation process moving at a snail's pace

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Even an invitation from Javier Solana does not guarantee a visa

BRUSSELS – The issue of the abolishment of the European Union's visa regime towards the Balkan countries is hotting up in Brussels. The most recent move is a public campaign by the European Stability Initiative (ESI), which was launched two days ago. This initiative has been joined by former Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Radmila Sekerinska, who is one of the personalities of ESI who have signed a declaration that calls on the EU to be strict, but fair and just towards the countries with regard to fulfilling the conditions.

„The EU's requirements are demanding. To meet them requires a lot of effort and a lot of money. But their fulfilment will make the whole of Europe, not just the Western Balkans, safer. We call on EU leaders to take this process seriously. The Union must not fail to reward countries that meet such difficult conditions,“ ESI's appeal–declaration reads.

The appeal is a result of the time pressure related to the visa liberalisation process. It already started late and it will be further delayed, according to ESI – it will be delayed at the start for at least one more month since the reports of the experts who visited the countries will not be ready this month, but in the middle of next month. Brussels will have to invest considerable efforts, according to ESI, if it wants to meet the date that has been unofficially mentioned for visa liberalisation – the beginning of 2010. Whether it will succeed or not depends not only to a large extent on the good will of the Czech and Swedish Presidencies, but also on the willingness of the European Commission (EC) to speed up the process. Even under completely normal conditions, this process would last many months, but the elections in the EU will additionally complicate it. According to ESI, the Western Balkan countries have been given 50 requirements they need to implement, and the EC will assess before the end of April how much they have achieved. If the conditions have been met, it will propose an amendment to transfer one or more countries from the black Schengen list to the white one.

Subsequently the relevant officials from the directorates for enlargement and for internal affairs will prepare the proposal, which will be submitted for internal consultation to the other 40 directorates. This will take ten days minimum. After that, one month will be spent on translating the proposal of the European Commission, which will then be passed on to all the 27 EU Commissioners for approval. This will not be possible before mid-June, just before the EU Council's meeting scheduled for 15 June.

Sending the ministers' [informal] decision to the European Parliament is an especially torturous issue,¹ because, due to the elections, the EP could review it only as an emergency issue in July or later. The decision needs to go through three readings in several committees; a special rapporteur must be appointed for it, and finally in October or November it could be discussed in plenary session, just before the last session of the Council for Justice and Home Affairs this year.

If the decision passes there too, it could become applicable after three weeks. This means that as of January 2010 some Balkan citizens would be able to travel to the EU without a visa. The EC is willing to achieve this, but will the member states be willing as well remains to be seen, since they refuse to take a public position and refer instead to the need to meet the visa roadmap conditions. That is why the coming two months will be crucial for a decision on visa liberalisation. The decision needs to be taken now in order to be confirmed at all institutional levels in the autumn.

In order to illustrate the absurdity of the visa regime and the necessity of its abolition, ESI mentions the example of a Serbian journalist who wanted to attend a security forum in Brussels and had an invitation letter from Javier Solana in order to receive a visa. According to ESI, the Belgian embassy refused to give him a visa with the explanation that Mr. Solana is not a Belgian citizen and can therefore not provide the necessary guarantee for the visa, and that the EU is not a Belgian company! In response to the same request the Spanish embassy told him that Solana does not live there, but in Belgium. Eventually, he got the visa after threatening to publish the whole story in the media.

¹ Comment from ESI: Please note that the account of the legislative process is not correct. See ESI's account at: <http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=354>

