

First assessments of progress on the visa roadmaps

10 December 2008

On 24 November 2008, the European Commission presented to EU member states' officials¹ its draft assessments of the progress that Western Balkan countries have made, according to their own evaluations, in fulfilling the requirements of the visa roadmaps. Judging by the Commission assessments, the countries fall into three groups: Macedonia is most advanced; Serbia and Montenegro make up the second group; and Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are in the third group (see excerpts from the Commission assessments).

The Commission's assessments are based on "readiness reports" that the Western Balkan countries submitted by September 2008. On 15 to 17 pages, they examine the state of play with regard to each individual requirement listed in the visa roadmaps, except the requirements related to implementation of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements and to Schengen visa refusals and entry refusals.² The Commission has broken down the assessed requirements into 42 benchmarks. Following the meeting, the Commission sent the assessments to the Western Balkan governments.

At the meeting, the Commission invited the member states to nominate experts that will participate in field missions that are planned to all the Western Balkan countries to obtain and verify information on the ground, and in seminars with government officials from the Western Balkans. All the field missions and seminars should be concluded by the end of March 2009, after which the Commission will report back to the EU member states' officials.

The Commission continues to believe that it will be able to propose next year a lifting of the visa restrictions for the most advanced countries, in particular Macedonia, if the pace of reform is maintained.³ However, some EU member states consider 2009 too

¹ Members of the Council working parties on the Western Balkan (COWEB) and on justice and home affairs issues.

² The Commission will use a "decreasing trend of the refusal rate, which should progress towards 3% for visa and 1,000 persons per year refused for entry into the common Schengen area," as "an indicative reference".

³ Discussion at the 24 November 2008 meeting. Also see European Commission press release, *2009 the year of the Western Balkans*, 5 November 2009, at: <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/1638&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>, and comments by Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn at a press conference on 5 November 2008, at:

early, notably Germany, Spain and Belgium.⁴ In ESI's opinion, there is no reason whatsoever to wait with the lifting of the restrictions if all conditions have been met – this would undermine the process and confirm the belief that a decision on visa-free travel is primarily of a political nature.

ESI's background paper published on 1 November 2008 led to a lively discussion of visa rejection rates in Macedonia as a table showing these rates was based on misleading statistics collected by the EU Council Secretariat,⁵ with the effect that the rejection rates were too high. ESI has obtained the correct figures from the consular services in Macedonia and replaced the table in the document, adding an explanation about what caused the confusing statistics.

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/08/582&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>.

⁴ Discussion at the 24 November 2008 meeting.

⁵ The EU Council Secretariat collects and publishes annually figures for the visa issued by Schengen countries. The statistics for 2007 that were used for the table are available at: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/08/st08/st08215.en08.pdf>.