

Netherlands douses Romania, Bulgaria Schengen hopes

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(BRUSSELS) - The Netherlands threw cold water on Bulgaria and Romania's hopes of winning approval from an EU summit Thursday to quickly join the Schengen visa-free travel area.

"We believe that Bulgaria and Romania have not done enough," said Prime Minister Mark Rutte during talks with European liberal leaders ahead of a summit kicking off at 1700 GMT.

"They have made progress, but they haven't done enough to fulfill all the Schengen criteria as we see them."

The Netherlands has made improvements in action against corruption and organised crime conditional to lifting a veto on European Union members Bulgaria and Romania joining the border-free area.

Any decision to expand the 25-nation Schengen area, home to 400 million Europeans who can cross borders without a passport, needs a unanimous vote.

A report from the European Commission last month praised Romania for progress while demanding stronger action from Bulgaria, triggering hopes in Bucharest that the EU summit might disassociate the two when the matter comes up at the summit Friday.

Brussels had praised Romania for responding to some key recommendations, notably saying Bucharest "accelerated the trial of high-level corruption cases."

Rutte's statements seemed to douse any such hopes however.

"With all the problems we have with the Greek border, the question is whether Bulgaria and Romania can implement in the right time on the ground all the prerequisites of the Schengen criteria," Rutte added.

Asked how long his country would oppose entry by the pair, Rutte said: "As long as necessary. That is all up to Romania and Bulgaria.

"I want them to implement all the necessary measures: rule of law, fighting corruption, independent judiciary."

Progress now is expected to be held up until July when the European Commission issues a full progress report.

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