

European Citizens Action Service (ECAS)

“Does it really matter? Visa Facilitation in the Western Balkans: Monitoring of the new Agreements”

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Panel 2: From visa facilitation to visa liberalisation

“The long wait for visa-free travel” - Speaking notes Alexandra Stiglmeier, European Stability Initiative:

As we have heard, visa facilitation neither works very well, nor can it be a substitute for visa-free travel, especially for the Western Balkans, which are official or potential candidates for EU membership.

Politically it is absurd that the EU has promised the Western Balkan countries a European future, but continues to make it difficult for their 20 million citizens to visit the EU and to learn what constitutes Europe. They perceive this as rejection; it damages the credibility of the EU offer, and in the countries it undermines the will to carry out the sometimes difficult reforms on the way to EU membership.

In fact, from a Western Balkan perspective it may be somewhat depressing to see that last week’s Commission Communication on an Eastern Partnership with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine proposes visa facilitation agreements with these countries followed by dialogues on visa-free travel. Like in the case of the Western Balkans, the dialogues would establish roadmaps leading to visa waiver, which would deal with the same four blocks of issues as in the case of the WB.

This does seem to confirm suspicions that visa-free travel with the EU is not just a technical issue, but a political decision. And one wonders why the WB had to wait for so many years to start discussing the requirements for obtaining a lifting of the visa requirements. The promise was made five years ago, at the EU/WB Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, when the Western Balkans countries were also given the prospect of EU membership.

For years member states put forward arguments such as that visa-free travel with the WB would result in an expansion of organised crime in the EU

involving WB nationals and increased illegal work migration and was simply not feasible. However, these arguments are questionable.

According to a recent report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) the image of the Balkans as a hotbed of criminal activities is outdated. UNODC finds that “the Balkan region is one of the safest in Europe” when it comes to classic crime such as burglaries, robberies, theft, murder etc.

UNODC also finds that organised crime activities such as the smuggling of drugs, guns and human beings through the region are in decline.

The one activity that has not stopped is heroin trafficking. The Balkans remains one of the transit zones for heroin destined for Western Europe. But here too, UNODC challenges a deep-rooted prejudice, which is that the main traffickers of heroin into Europe are ethnic Albanians. This is not the case.

Based on an analysis of almost 19,000 heroin trafficking arrests made in 2004 in 15 European countries, *all* citizens of Albania, Serbia and Macedonia combined (as criminal statistics do not differentiate between the different ethnic groups within a country and there are ethnic Albanians in all three countries) represented only about 6% of the heroin trafficking arrestees. UNODC concluded:

“In short, the single most notorious Balkan organized crime phenomenon – the role played by ethnic Albanian traffickers in West European heroin markets – appears to be in decline. Similar trends are seen in the other major organised crime markets involving the region.”

Also, when it comes to illegal work migration, the dangers are exaggerated, particularly in view of the relatively small population of the Western Balkans (20 million, two times Belgium). A study for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which analysed surveys and a wide range of migration-related data from governments in Southeast Europe, came to the following conclusion in 2005:

“The survey data points to two important conclusions. First, they show that many of those who wish to work in the EU have already done so, even if illegally. Second, they show that Southeast Europe’s migration potential in absolute numbers is relatively small.”

According to the study, the migration potential from the Western Balkans would be between 500,000 and one million, which is manageable – in fact, EU countries could even manage it pro-actively.

In the case of the EU's eastern neighbours, the Commission is tentatively proposing a targeted opening of the EU labour market to their citizens, as well as measures to facilitate circular migration. This is an excellent idea that should be also offered to Kosovo, Albania and the other WB countries.

Now the visa liberalisation process for the Western Balkans is underway, so let's discuss where we stand.

On 24 November 2008, the Commission presented to EU member states' officials its assessments of the progress made by the Western Balkan countries in meeting the requirements of the visa roadmaps, based on the readiness reports that the Western Balkan countries had to submit earlier. At ESI, we have looked at the Commission's assessments and tried to make a short overview, which I have printed out for you.

The WB countries seem to fall into three groups: Macedonia is doing really well and most advanced; Serbia and Montenegro make up the second group; and Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are trailing somewhat behind in the third group.

In fact, Macedonia is doing so well that the Commission believes that it could easily meet all the benchmarks next year. Some member states, notably Germany, are more sceptical. But if Macedonia continues to make good progress, which it will in all likelihood continue to do because the government is determined to get visa-free travel, it would be embarrassing to withhold visa-free travel for the Macedonians.

At the meeting two weeks ago, the Commission also 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, as well as in seminars with government officials from the Western Balkans. All the field missions should be concluded by the end of March 2009, after which the Commission will report back to the member states.

Granting Macedonian visa-free travel next year will thus require some political determination to pass quickly through the time-consuming procedures

in the EU institutions – it takes time to draft a proposal and a Communication, translate them, have them adopted by the Commission, obtain an opinion of the Parliament, put the proposal on the agenda of the Council, have it adopted there... - but it is possible.

After Macedonia, it is also important to help the remaining countries qualify for visa-free travel. While Serbia is in a good position to obtain it because it is considered the regional driving engine, and Montenegro with its 600,000 citizens should not have major problems either, there is a danger that Bosnia and Albania, both of which suffer from a very bad image, are left behind.

It would be fatal if they remain behind the Schengen Wall. It would demoralise the citizens, destroying the hopes of Albanians in the EU and further depressing the already depressed Bosnians, and it would undermine willingness to reform. The Commission, but also member states, should make every effort to keep these two countries focused on implementing the visa roadmaps. They should acknowledge when there is progress and not succumb to the bad images of these two countries, such as the one that Albanians are the main heroin traffickers in Europe. The reality is different.

More information about the visa issue is available on ESI's website at:
<http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=324>