

Strict but fair – The Declaration

19 March 2009

In the 1990s, Europe underwent a fundamental transformation: in the East, democracy and market economy replaced communist dictatorships, and the continent began to grow together once again. The political reunification culminated in the abolition of border controls: the Schengen Area now includes most of Central Europe.

During this period, the citizens of the Western Balkans had a very different experience. Yugoslavia fell apart. War, displacement and economic hardship became a daily routine. Sanctions busting and the smuggling of arms, drugs and people all flourished. The people of Albania fared only slightly better, their country descending into chaos in 1997.

For outsiders, the Balkans became synonymous with refugees and crime. To close borders and to restrict travel through visa requirements was a natural response for the EU. The citizens of former Yugoslavia, accustomed to free travel, suddenly found themselves confined.

Today the Balkans are changing. A decade has passed since the last regional war, in Kosovo. Reforms in the security and judicial sectors are making it increasingly difficult for criminals to operate. Whereas in 1997 foreign troops had to be dispatched to Albania to restore order, in 2009 Albania is joining NATO. Soldiers from Bosnia's unified professional 10,000-strong army, meanwhile, contribute to peace-keeping missions around the world.

As the Balkan region is turning from a security consumer to a security provider, it is high time to take another look at the EU visa regime. It was put in place under very different circumstances. Conditions have changed. Will the visa regime?

For the last two decades, Albanians, Bosnians and Herzegovinians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Kosovars and Serbs have dreamt about being able to travel to the rest of Europe without a visa, like most of them did as Yugoslav citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, this vision might become reality.

The EU has recently taken encouraging steps. It has outlined close to 50 conditions that the Western Balkan countries need to meet to join the Schengen White List. It has

dispatched experts to the region to assess progress. This suggests that it is now in the hands of Balkan politicians to obtain the prize of visa-free travel – and that the EU has an interest in seeing them succeed.

The EU's conditions are demanding. To meet them requires money and effort. But their fulfilment will make the whole of Europe, not just the Western Balkans, safer. Having well-secured borders, regulated asylum procedures, forgery-proof passports and police structures able to cooperate with law enforcement agencies throughout Europe is a good in itself. It is cooperation, not exclusion, which works best in fighting organised crime and illegal migration.

We strongly support the visa liberalisation process, which creates real incentives for Western Balkan countries to undertake EU-guided measures that are effective in enhancing the security both of their own citizens and the EU's. The process also promises to mobilise support in the Balkans for a wider European reform agenda and to enhance the EU's credibility in the region.

We call on leaders in the Western Balkans to carry out the required reforms. We are glad to see civil society in the region increase efforts to monitor progress. We call on EU leaders and institutions to take this process seriously. The EU must not postpone rewarding countries that have made serious efforts to meet its demanding conditions. **It is appropriate for the EU to be strict; it is incumbent upon it to be fair.**

Giuliano Amato, chairman of the White List Project Advisory Board, former Italian prime minister and interior minister

Misha Glenny, author of “McMafia: Crime without Frontiers” and several books on the Balkans

Heather Grabbe, former senior adviser to the European Commissioner for Enlargement

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Alexandra Stiglmeier, director of the White List Project, ESI senior analyst

*The goal of the ESI White List Project, supported by the **Robert Bosch Stiftung**, is to ensure the success of the visa liberalisation process.*