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Towards visa-free travel¹

The Commission is launching a dialogue with each of the Western Balkan countries on visa liberalisation. It will soon propose road-maps outlining conditions to be met before the visa obligation can be lifted.

Visa facilitation agreements

Citizens of the Western Balkan countries, except Croatia, still need visas to enter the EU.

As a first step towards visa liberalisation, the Commission has concluded visa facilitation agreements with the Western Balkan countries. These agreements entered into force on 1 January 2008, together with respective readmission agreements².

The visa facilitation agreements substantially improve the conditions for obtaining visas for travel to the EU: they maintain a reduced visa fee (€35 instead of €60, presently required for citizens of third countries) and exempt broad categories of persons (e.g. students and pensioners) from these fees. They set time-limits for issuing a visa (normally 10 days). In addition, they simplify and clarify the procedures for issuing visas to certain categories of persons (e.g. business people, students, journalists). Frequent travellers will be granted multi-entry visas with long periods of validity. Holders of diplomatic passports are exempt from the visa obligation.

Visa liberalisation dialogue

The Commission is launching dialogues with the Western Balkan countries in order to establish road-maps on the conditions to be met for lifting the visa requirement. The dialogue with Serbia started in January, with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro in February. With Albania the dialogue will start in March and Bosnia and Herzegovina will follow.

Four key issues will be covered in the roadmaps: document security, illegal migration, public order and security, as well as external relations. The road-maps will be drawn up by the Commission in consultation with the Council and the Western Balkan countries. They will be tailor made to allow each country to focus reform efforts and address the EU's requirements. The Commission intends to finalise the road-maps as soon as possible.

¹ Fact sheet for the Commission Communication: "Western Balkans: enhancing the European perspective" See IP 378

² A readmission agreement with Albania has been in force since May 2006.

The speed of movement towards visa liberalisation will depend on each country's progress in fulfilling the benchmarks. For the whole process, the countries' capacity to ensure correct and effective implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements will also be taken into consideration. The Commission will provide financial and technical assistance to support implementation of the road-maps.

The Commission and the Council will closely monitor progress in the relevant reforms. Once the conditions have been fulfilled, the Commission will propose to the Council the lifting of the respective visa obligation, by amending Council Regulation 539/2001³.

³ Council Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 of 15 March 2001 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement (OJ L 81, 21.3.2001).