

## Visa-Free Travel To The Schengen Zone

During the weekend of 7 November, unofficial road signs bearing the distances to capital cities in the Schengen Zone started appearing across Albania's capital Tirana. They had been put up in anticipation of the Council's approval of the visa liberalization regime for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) the following Monday and – as it turned out – rightly so.

The process of visa liberalization for the Western Balkans, which allows citizens of the region to spend up to 90 days in the Schengen zone without a visa, had been set in motion in 2008, but was temporarily halted for Albania and BiH in July 2009. In May this year, the European Commission adopted a proposal to extend visa-free travel to these two countries as well. A further step in this direction was made with the European Parliament's approval of a report by MEP Tanja Fajon, arguing that Albania and BiH had met the outstanding requirements, in September. Visa-free travel is likely to become a reality by mid-December.

Citizens of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia had already been granted visa-free travel in December 2009, after experts from the Commission and the European Parliament had visited the region over the summer. At the time, Albania, BiH and Kosovo were excluded because they were considered not to have met the relevant conditions, in particular regarding the issuing of biometric passports.

Although Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were deemed to have met the requirements for visa-free travel, problems nevertheless arose when the policy entered into force. The main problem was an increase in the number of asylum claims by people entering the Schengen zone without visas. These asylum seekers – mostly from Southern Serbia and Northern Macedonia – were motivated primarily by economic considerations. A misunderstanding of the terms of visa-free travel, combined with exploitation by criminal groups posing as travel agents, underlay attempts to seek a more prosperous future in the EU, and in Belgium, Germany and Sweden in particular. EU member states do not grant asylum on economic grounds, and those seeking it were immediately sent back to their countries of origin. However, the large number of claims endangered the visa-free regime for Macedonia and Serbia. An official caution from the EU spurred the two countries into action, resulting in stricter

enforcement of the conditions for visa-free travel and a crackdown on illegal travel agencies, as well as attempts to improve the quality of life in the regions producing the most asylum seekers.

The high number of asylum claims lodged by Macedonian and Serbian citizens also had implications for the visa liberalization process in Albania and BiH. The experiences of early 2010 made some member states wary of further extending visa-free travel. Subsequently, a follow-up control mechanism was put in place, under which the EU and the partner countries will cooperate to guarantee the security of borders and biometric passports and to reduce organised crime and corruption, amongst other things. Crucially, '[t]he EU has also reminded the Balkan states that the Lisbon Treaty allows the union to introduce necessary measures if the situation gets out of control in one or several member states.'<sup>1</sup> The introduction of these additional safety measures managed to convince hesitant member states to vote in favour of extending visa-free travel. Kosovo, however, was judged not to have met the conditions for visa-free travel, making it the only country in the Western Balkans whose citizens still need visas to enter the Schengen zone. Achieving visa liberalization for Kosovo will also be complicated by the fact that 5 of the 27 EU member states do not recognize its 2008 declaration of independence.

The abolition of visa requirements was met with great excitement in both Albania and BiH, with celebrations similar to those in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia at the end of 2009. Indeed, it will make visits to the Schengen zone significantly easier for people from these countries. However, citizens will need biometric passports, for which there are currently long waiting times, and will still be closely scrutinized upon entry into the Schengen area. The next few months will show whether the visa liberalization indeed represents the important step forward in relations with the EU it is hailed to be.

*Written by Sara van den Hof – Interns of Analytica*

---

<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Jovanovska, 'Tight controls on visa-free travelers from Albania and Bosnia', <http://waz.euobserver.com/887/31229>, retrieved November 2010.