

Grassroots Europeanisation in the Western Balkans is just starting: Visa facilitation*

In April 2007, the Western Balkan countries initialed visa facilitation agreements that will allow more simplified procedures when applying for visas for entering the EU countries. Readmission agreements were also initialed between the countries of the region and the European Commission that will require from the countries to take back all of their citizens found to be residing in the EU illegally. Macedonia signed the agreement in Brussels on 13 April, while Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro signed theirs in Zagreb, on 14 April.

The initialing of the agreements came as a follow up to the November 2006 decision of the EU member states to authorise the European Commission to open negotiations for the conclusion of these agreements. The decision was followed by a number of rounds of negotiations between the EC and the countries of the region, starting from November 2006 and concluding in April 2007.

The agreements, expected to enter into force starting from 1 January 2008, will make it easier for citizens of the Western Balkan countries, including those such as students, businessmen, civil society representatives and other group of citizens to have easier processes of acquiring visas for entry into EU. The arrangement includes decrease of the costs, shortening of the application period and a possibility for issuing multi-year visas.

* This Analytica brief was written by the Analytica's staff members and contributed by the interns Felicity Butt, Mark O`Mahoney, Steven Houston, Alexander Ward and Pere Sola.

These visa facilitation arrangements, for the citizens of the countries of the Western Balkans, is to set a stage for the first direct contact between the EU and the citizens of the region, as so far Europeanisation arrangements of the Western Balkans have mainly included government related arrangements rather than arrangements at the grassroots level. Joint statement of the EC Vice-President Franco Frattini and Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, is a statement of the situation: "This step reflects the commitment by the EU to promoting people-to-people contacts between the Western Balkans and the Union. It is really good news for the citizens in the region and a tangible proof of what the European perspective can offer".

New visa arrangement is a proof of the importance of further opening of the Europeanisation processes to the countries of the Western Balkans and of the results acquired by the work of the governments of the region in bringing necessary reform required by the EU for the launch of the visa facilitation arrangement.

The rules established in the visa facilitation agreements will be a concrete step forward along the path set out by the Thessaloniki agenda of 2003 for integration of the Western Balkans into EU. Visa facilitation should encourage the Western Balkan countries to implement relevant reforms and reinforce their resolve for change in areas such as strengthening the rule of law, fighting organized crime and corruption, and increasing their administrative capacity in border control and security of documents. Once the incentives are offered, change can start to happen.

Consular operational services play an integral role in a nation's diplomacy in general, and a major part of this role is covered by the issuance of visas to qualified foreigners seeking entry to a nation in question. The rationale behind visa regimes is a diplomatic one, as they are used as a soft diplomatic tool, which is especially relevant in today's type of international world where a nuanced and multilateral approach is required. In this context, the EU uses it as chief conditionality tool to encourage further reforms in the Western Balkans.

The present EU visa regime rises out of the Schengen Agreement signed in 1985 by seven EU countries to bring an end to the need for internal border controls. This agreement has since been extended and now includes 15 countries (13 EU and 2 non-EU states). Although the agreement was done outside of the normal EU integration procedures, with the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999, it became part of the EU legislation. As such, it brought new rules with regard to the overall visa policies of the EU member states towards the third countries, including to the Western Balkan countries.

EU member states have been obliged to enforce the standardized EU visa regime policy, including the EU Council Regulation (No. 539/2001) that differentiates between a negative list (the so called 'Black List') and a positive list (the 'White List'). The former lists states whose citizens need a visa to enter the Schengen Area, the latter those whose citizens are exempt from visa requirements. The crux of the issue is why all the states of the Western Balkans (with the exception of Croatia) are on the 'Black List' of states requiring a visa to enter the EU.

Implications of the EU visa regime

The visa regime has not been in the positive interest of having further people-to-people contacts. It has not served the Europeanisation processes of the countries of the region, which is the ultimate aim of the current EU-Western Balkans relations framework. The most challenging thing to be explained has been the existence of the visa regime for the countries that have perspective for EU membership.

Romania, which previously allowed visa free travel from Moldova with whom it had considerably cultural and linguistic ties, has revoked this status of Moldova since it joined the EU on 1 January 2007. Likewise, Bulgaria has had to blacklist Serbia and Macedonia with whom freedom of movement was previously unhindered. However, this new visa regime has adversely affected links between Bulgaria and the countries such as Macedonia. The new visa regime has caused sharp a drop in numbers crossing the border. The result has been a drastic fall in the number of Macedonians travelling to Bulgaria.

Obtaining visas to travel to EU from the blacklisted states of the Western Balkans has required considerable time and energy. This includes asking for appointment at least one month in advance, documentation proving the necessity to travel to a Schengen country, a round trip already paid ticket, international travel insurance, documents proving the employment situation, salary and bank statements and others.

The visa regime has also been costly to individuals. The standard cost of a Visa to enter the Schengen zone is 35 euros, plus the travel insurance expenses that can go up to 100 euros. This is merely the cost for the visa and it does not include the costs of traveling to a consulate (which may not be in the country of living) to get paperwork checked and signed, the cost of official translations and copies of paperwork and the hours and days of work lost queuing to put down visa applications. All of the former can raise the cost of obtaining a Visa from anywhere between 40 and 200 Euros, well beyond the capacity of most people in the Western Balkan countries. Whilst this price may not seem very high considering one could potentially gain access to the entire Schengen region, it is a high price to pay in a region where the average monthly income is around 250 euros. There has been rough estimation that Macedonians, who can visit only 12 countries visa-free in the world, spend about €2.5 million a year on visas.

These cumbersome procedures have all served for erecting new barriers that traditionally did not exist, as well has led to alienation of the Balkans, as the states found themselves becoming increasingly isolated: economically, socially, culturally, but perhaps most importantly, ideologically.

It has been estimated that almost 50% of the citizens of the region have never been abroad and one can assume it is a worse situation for the majority of youth part of the population. For successful Europeanisation, which is the goal set for the countries of the Western Balkans, people must be familiar with to the values and society that they to aspire to. Those that are expected to transform their societies and make the Balkans a peaceful and stable region are not having the opportunity to be introduced to the system of values they are expected to establish, an opportunity that is yet to be offered with the expectation of the full liberalisation of the visa regime.

What remains to be done?

The visa facilitation arrangements have been halfway through for the final goal of the full liberalisation of the visa regime. However, the attempts of the Western Balkan countries to liberalise the EU's visa regime have to compete with a number of trends in today's European societies such as enlargement fatigue, slowdown of the economic growth, and growing third world migration to the countries of the EU. This makes things more difficult for the citizens of the Western Balkan countries to achieve a liberalised entrance to the EU as more and more EU citizens perceive that the eastern Europeans are coming to steal their job opportunities. All of these trends that have come to dominate the national politics in the EU countries, have strong relevance to the positions of the EU member states to the visa liberalisation processes as this domain remains under the inter-governmental decision-making of the EU. European Commission has no power without the mandate of the EU member states to negotiate the visa liberalisation. This is despite evidence that the countries of the region have perspective for full EU membership, and despite the fact that the citizens of the Western Balkan countries who historically have lived in the EU member states since 1960s, tend to maintain strong links with their home country and want to return to use the skills and education gained within the EU to improve their own societies. The benefit seen by the EU countries from the Western Balkan citizens starting from 1960s and onwards should logically encourage the opening of Europe's frontiers to the Western Balkan countries.

The EU has repeatedly stated that the main condition for liberalization or facilitation of visa requirements constitutes sufficient cooperation on security issues, especially regarding organized crime and illegal immigration. In this way, the EU can exert some leverage on the countries and ostensibly pressure them to cooperate. As in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania, liberalisation was only achieved after extensive security and anti-fraud reforms implemented by the governments. However, those reforms were achieved once Bulgaria and Romania were offered visa free entry into EU.

In terms of meeting the criteria for visa liberalisation, set in the visa facilitation negotiations processes, for example Macedonia has already introduced system of issuing Biometric passports preventing possible falsification of its national documents and has established border management structures compatible with the EU best practices of having integrated border management in place. It has transferred border control responsibilities from army to police, has established an autonomous border police administration, has built a coordination centre that links and connects all relevant agencies such as police, customs and border police and has established visa management information system that connects the ministry of interior with the ministry of foreign affairs and embassies abroad. This integrated border concept has become increasingly orientated towards meeting the visa liberalisation goals.

Liberalisation of the visa regime is also strongly tied to the credibility of EU membership for the countries of the region. Wishes and efforts for the liberalisation are not so much about the visa liberalisation. In fact, they are about reconfirmation of the perspective for full EU membership. Thus, the liberalisation of the visa regime is intimately tied to the overall process of reforms inspired by the EU membership perspective. Therefore any change to the visa regime, will reflect not only on these countries' ability to improve border controls and issue new identification documentation, but also whether they are making sufficient progress in aligning overall their system of economy and politics, with more wide reform policies required by the European integration agenda. Evidently, the visa facilitations negotiations did not explicitly state this. But one cannot help but realise that particularly given the present societal and security situation within the EU, the EU is unlikely to alleviate it's visa regime altogether with any country that does not meet a wide range of requirements for EU membership. This applies particularly for the countries of the Western Balkans. One can make this last point because the EU does have a visa free regime with some non-European countries where the EU membership perspective does not apply.

At present it seems that it will take a while for full liberalisation of the visa regime for the citizens of the Western Balkan countries. As the countries of the region perform on the conditions set by the EU, it will be the start of the accessions negotiations for the countries of the region –achieving the candidate status will not suffice – that will set the stage for the full liberalisation of the visa regime. The countries of the region should carry on, taking significant steps to improve border controls and immigration and asylum legislation in order to match with the EU requirements on visa regime, and continue reforming their administration and society in meeting the wider EU accessions conditions.