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The EU is lifting the visa requirement for citizens of Albania and BiH

On 8 November, the EU's Council of Justice and Home Affairs unanimously decided to lift the obligation of holding short-term (3-month) visas for citizens of BiH and Albania who cross the border of the Schengen Area. The decision will come into effect in the middle of December 2010. At the same time, considering increasing objections from EU member states against the liquidation of visas, the European Commission has promised to introduce monitoring mechanisms for all Balkan countries which have been covered by the visa liberalisation process.

As part of the visa liberalisation process initiated in 2008, the visa requirement was to be lifted for Balkan countries (with the exception of Croatia and Kosovo) following the fulfilment of strict recommendations as provided in the 'road maps'. In December 2009, visas were cancelled for Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia. Some EU member states (including France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark and Germany) believe that the number of political asylum seekers has significantly increased as a consequence of that decision. For this reason, they opposed the lifting of the visa requirement for citizens of Albania and BiH despite these countries having fulfilled all the EC's conditions. However, such a decision would adversely affect the reliability of the EU's policy and provide grounds for the accusation of using different standards in its approach to individual countries in this region.

In its desire to alleviate member states' fears, the EC decided to introduce two monitoring mechanisms in order to prevent potential negative consequences of the visa liberalisation. Firstly, the EC will be checking whether the Balkan countries are continuing the process of the implementation of the reforms listed in the road map. The effects of the monitoring will be published in reports (most probably annual). Additionally, the EC will establish a mechanism of trilateral consultations (Balkan countries, EU member states and the EC) in the case of an upsurge in the number of asylum seekers. The EC also pointed out that in compliance with article 78 of the Treaty of Lisbon, the process of visa liberalisation can be suspended if the countries which it concerns fail to meet their obligations. The EC's actions fit in with the general trend of setting increasingly strict requirements for countries which aspire to EU membership. <MarSz>