

France threatens to delay the enlargement of the Schengen area to include Romania and Bulgaria

In August, France intensified criticism of Romania and Bulgaria for their lack of progress in the process of the integration of the Roma minority. The French secretary of state for European affairs Pierre Lellouche warned that the problems would cause a delay in Romania's accession to the Schengen area. The technical preparations for adopting the Schengen *acquis* are advanced in both countries, however it cannot be ruled out that the French authorities will be trying to delay the enlargement scheduled for March 2011.

Spectacular actions liquidating illegal camps and sending foreigners of Roma background back to their countries of their origin, mainly Romania and Bulgaria, have been underway since the beginning of August in France. Between 600 and 700 Roma people left France in one month, a clear majority of whom were sent back to Romania. At the same time, the French authorities are criticising Romania for the lack of progress in the process of inclusion of the Roma minority, indicating that the country should allocate a greater part of the EU funds it receives.

Bulgaria has reacted calmly to the actions of the French authorities. Romania's reaction, however, is firmer; for example, the Romanian interior minister Vasile Blaga emphasised that none of the Roma who were sent back had broken the law in France.

A country wishing to join the Schengen area needs to satisfy a number of technical requirements, such as an adequate level of border and personal data protection, the implementation of IT systems and police and judicial co-operation. Bulgaria's and Romania's progress in the preparation for accession to the Schengen area has been evaluated positively by the European Commission (the last report is expected in December 2010). However a decision on enlargement is also a political issue and must be taken unanimously; hence it cannot be ruled out that the French authorities could slow down the enlargement process in their attempt to demonstrate their will to limit illegal immigration.

<dab>