

Visas: third countries whose nationals are subject to or exempt from a visa requirement

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The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs adopted the report drafted by Tanja FAJON (S&D, SI) amending, under the consultation procedure, the proposal for a Council regulation amending Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 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.

The amendments proposed by the parliamentary committee aim to put the Western Balkans on an equal footing as regards visa exemptions.

The main amendments were as follows:

- **Including Albania and Bosnia in the proposed exemption regime:** MEPs recall that the Commission initiated the current visa liberalisation dialogue with a regional approach and a European perspective, involving countries of the Western Balkans on an equal footing and **without any discrimination**. In this context, MEPs consider that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, as well as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, should be transferred from Annex I to Annex II (visa exemption) of Regulation (EC) No 539/2001. MEPs stipulate that the same criteria laid down in the roadmaps for visa liberalisation should be applied to all countries concerned.
- **Postponing visa exemption if criteria are not met:** according to MEPs, all of the Western Balkan countries that have met the benchmarks should be admitted to the visa-free travel regime **from the beginning of 2010**. Those countries that, despite having made substantial progress, have not fully met the benchmarks should be granted the same privilege as soon as they meet the benchmarks as set out in the corresponding roadmaps for visa liberalisation. The exemption from the visa requirement should apply to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina after an **assessment by the Commission that each meets all the benchmarks set in the relevant roadmap for visa liberalisation** and after approval of that assessment by the Council. The Commission should, without delay and no later than in the early 2010, present a report on the achievements made by Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina in meeting all the benchmarks set in the roadmap. MEPs call on the Commission to assist the relevant authorities of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina in this respect.
- **As regards Kosovo:** lastly, to avoid any new forms of discrimination against the citizens of this region and with the aim of furthering the implementation of the Thessaloniki agenda, the Commission, within the limits of its competence, should **start a visa dialogue with Kosovo** with a view to establishing a roadmap for visa facilitation and liberalisation similar to those established with Western Balkan countries and to liberalise the issuance of visas as soon as it is ready.