

ORAL QUESTION WITH DEBATE O-0063/06

pursuant to Rule 108 of the Rules of Procedure

by Doris Pack, on behalf of the PPE-DE Group, Gisela Kallenbach, on behalf of the Verts/ALE Group, Hannes Swoboda, on behalf of the PSE Group, Erik Meijer, Ignasi Guardans Cambó, Jelko Kacin and Henrik Lax
to the Council

Subject: Visa policy towards the countries of the Western Balkans

Three years after the adoption of the Thessaloniki Agenda of June 2003, the achievements of the EU on visa policy towards the countries of the Western Balkans are still poor. The EU Member States apply different regimes to those countries and, in general, major restrictions are in place. This is seriously hampering social and economic exchanges and development for the region, and reducing opportunities in many fields, from education to trade, from regional cooperation to employment. The efficiency of a restrictive regime in the fight against organised crime can be questioned. Criminals unfortunately already benefit from free movement without visas, and in some EU Member States the rate of criminality is higher than in some countries of the Western Balkans. The Western Balkans countries have been given an assurance that they have European prospects, e.g. the EU has clearly stated on various occasions that they are heading towards European integration and, in due course, full EU membership.

Thessaloniki has enriched the Stabilisation and Association process with elements taken from experience with the new countries which acceded to the EU in 2004, such as the opening of EU programmes and political dialogue.

The European Commission, after Thessaloniki, put forward some proposals to make this enhanced rapprochement more concrete, and, more recently, a communication at the end of January which includes proposals for EU legislation on visa facilitation referring to the countries of the Western Balkans. At the Vienna Inter-ministerial Conference on EU internal security in early May, important declarations were made by Commissioner Frattini, but action is still missing. This impasse is counter-productive and contradictory in respect of the EU's own policy.

Would the Council be ready to take action on this?

What are the intergovernmental cooperation measures the Council could adopt, as intermediate steps, pending the transposition into national legislation on directives that the EU has already adopted and the adoption of new EU legislation (directives) on visas for the Western Balkans, to ease and facilitate free movement of students, politicians and businessmen initially and all citizens as soon as possible?

Will the Council ask the Member States to agree on early application of some of these measures?

Tabled: 12.06.2006

Forwarded: 13.06.2006

Deadline for reply: 04.07.2006