



**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



16883/1/09 REV 1 (Presse 355)

**PRESS RELEASE**

2979th Council meeting

**Justice and Home Affairs**

Brussels, 30 November and 1 December 2009

President            **Mrs Beatrice ASK**  
Minister for Justice  
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Minister for Migration and Asylum Policy

**P R E S S**

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## **Visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans countries**

The Council decided to grant visa free travel to and throughout the Schengen area for citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (15521/09). It did so by adopting amendments to regulation No 539/2001. The visa waiver will apply from 19 December 2009 to holders of biometric passports.

Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not considered to have met all the benchmarks agreed under the visa liberalisation dialogue with the countries of the Western Balkans. A political declaration, however, invites the Commission to propose visa liberalisation for these two countries as soon as they comply with all the benchmarks, with a view to achieving visa free travel for their citizens as soon as possible (see full text below). The main areas where benchmarks were set under the visa liberalisation dialogue are border controls, passport security, fight against organised crime and corruption as well as external relations and fundamental rights.

The amended regulation also makes a reference to Kosovo under UNSCR 1244/99 with the result that persons residing in Kosovo require a visa when travelling to the EU.

The visa liberalisation dialogue with the countries of the Western Balkans was launched in early 2008. The Commission presented a proposal to amend regulation 539/2001 in July 2009, and the European Parliament delivered its opinion on 12 November 2009.

The text of the joint political declaration of the European Parliament and the Council reads:

"The European Union strongly supports the goal of the abolishment of the visa regime for all the countries of the Western Balkans.

The European Parliament and the Council recognise that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia fulfil all conditions for visa liberalisation. This has allowed for the adoption of the amendments to Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 in due time to allow those three countries to join the visa-free regime by 19 December 2009.

The European Parliament and the Council express the hope that Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina will also qualify for visa liberalisation soon. To that end, the European Parliament and the Council urge those two countries to make all efforts to comply with all the benchmarks set out in the Commission's roadmaps.

The European Parliament and the Council invite the Commission to present a legislative proposal for amending Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 as soon as it has assessed that each country meets the benchmarks set out in the Commission's roadmaps, with a view to achieving visa liberalisation for citizens of those countries as soon as possible.

The European Parliament and the Council will examine a proposal for amending Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 concerning Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a matter of urgency."

**External relations: USA, the Western Balkans and Russia**

Under external relations, the Council took note of the results of the ministerial meetings with the USA (27-28 October) and the Western Balkans countries (16-17 November) as well as of the result and follow up of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (Athens 4-5 November). Ministers also discussed their expectations with regard the meeting with Russia (2 December 2009).

At the meeting with the USA, a statement was adopted which describes the objectives for the five years ahead. Issues identified include an international agreement on data protection of personal data exchanged for law enforcement purposes, an EU-US declaration on common principles that guide the fight against terrorism and an expansion of the dialogue on migration and refugee issues.

The meeting with the Western Balkans countries showed that clear, but uneven, progress is made towards meeting the *acquis* and European standards. In particular, the visa liberalisation dialogue has proven to be a strong incentive for reform.

Concerning the Russian Federation, subjects for discussion include the possibility for Europol to conclude an operational agreement with Russia, visa issues and a strengthened migration dialogue.