

Joint press conference by Vice President Barrot and Commissioner Rehn on visa liberalisation, Brussels, 15 July 2009 – transcript

Vice President Jacques Barrot:

Je suis heureux en compagnie de Olli Rehn de vous rendre compte de la suppression des visas de courte durée pour les citoyens de l'ancienne république Yougoslave de Macédoine, du Monténégro et de la Serbie. C'est une étape historique dans nos relations avec les pays des Balkans occidentaux. Cette suppression des visas était très attendue évidemment, cela va permettre des relations beaucoup plus fréquentes, beaucoup plus étroites, entre les citoyens de ces trois états et l'espace de Schengen. Notre proposition a tenu compte des progrès accomplis par ces trois pays. Suite à un dialogue sur la libéralisation des visas lancé au premier semestre 2008 avec les cinq pays des Balkans occidentaux. Les feuilles de route définissaient les conditions à remplir par chaque pays.

- 1- Introduction de passeports biométriques
- 2- Une bonne gestion des frontières et une politique globale en matière de migration
- 3- La lutte contre la criminalité organisée, la corruption, le trafic des êtres humains
- 4- Le respect des droits fondamentaux

Nos experts ont évalué les progrès faits par l'ARYM le Monténégro et la Serbie. Au vu des progrès réalisés, nous pouvons aujourd'hui proposer au conseil qui décidera, probablement fin Octobre, la suppression des visas à partir du premier Janvier 2010.

Le dialogue se poursuit avec l'Albanie et la Bosnie Herzégovine. Ces deux pays, notamment la Bosnie Herzégovine n'a pas encore engagé une politique systématique de passeports biométriques. L'ancienne république Yougoslave de Macédoine a, je crois, vraiment un bilan très favorable. Pour le Monténégro, nous allons regarder quand même attentivement la mise en place effective de la loi sur les étrangers. Le Monténégro étant une destination touristique importante, il faut clarifier le statut des étrangers. Et puis Il faut évidemment que le Monténégro continue la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé.

Pour la Serbie, se posait le problème de la gestion des frontière avec le Kosovo et la coopération avec EULEX. Je laisserai Olli Rehn rendre compte de cette situation qui nous paraît répondre à notre souhait de voir en tout état de cause, le statut du Kosovo complètement à l'abris de toute interprétation, à partir de ce problème. Nous avons aussi avec le gouvernement Serbe réglé les problèmes des Serbes vivant au Kosovo. Nous voilà donc à la veille de cette suppression effective des visas pour les citoyens de ces trois pays à partir de Janvier 2010. J'ajoute que nous continuerons à envoyer des missions de vérification pour voir si toutes les conditions sont bien remplies. Si les engagements sont bien tenus. Et j'ai demandé notamment au gouvernement Serbe et à monsieur ministre de l'intérieur de nous adresser un rapport au plus tard fin Septembre sur la mise en application des engagements pris par le gouvernement Serbe.

Voilà, La route est dégagée, cher Olli Rehn qui a beaucoup souhaité que le commissaire chargé de la sécurité aille dans ce sens, je crois Olli qu'il est bon que tu puisses aussi souligner l'importance de ce symbole qui est un symbole très parlant du rapprochement avec ces trois pays Balkaniques.

Commissioner Olli Rehn

Merci Jacques je suis ravi de partager avec toi l'annonce d'une très bonne nouvelle pour les citoyens et les citoyennes des pays des Balkans occidentaux. Je voudrais aussi te remercier pour ton fort engagement personnel en faveur de la libéralisation des visas. C'est vraiment un grand jour pour les peuples des Balkans occidentaux pour l'Europe et pour moi aussi certainement.

We know how much visa-free travel means to the people of the Western Balkans. This is why the Commission has taken the initiative over the past two years to move ahead with the countries of the Western Balkans. We want everyone to benefit – once their governments have met the benchmarks. The basic conditions are the same for everyone.

Each country was presented with a "road map" last year setting out these conditions, ranging from passport security, better border controls, to a reinforced fight against corruption and organised crime. Each country's progress has since been evaluated on its own merits.

We are pleased today to propose granting visa free travel to the citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – provided that the latter two countries meet a few open benchmarks in time. I trust that our proposal will be approved by the EU Member States after we have consulted the European Parliament.

Once that happens the brand new biometric passport will be enough to travel to the 'Schengen countries.' These countries consist of EU Member States, except the United Kingdom and Ireland. They also include Switzerland, Norway and Iceland.

For the citizens of the Western Balkans visa free travel means no more queuing at embassies, no more visa fees, and no more collecting of supporting documents such as invitation letters, tickets and paying for their translation. The citizens of these countries will be able to visit family and friends in the EU, and spend their holidays here without having to undergo lengthy visa procedures. It will be easier for young people to study in the EU and it will be good for business travellers.

In a nutshell this will mean a further europeanisation of the civil societies in the Western Balkans and it is an example that European integration is not only a matter of integrating nations, but also peoples and citizens.

It is our common goal that Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina could follow their neighbours soon. The "roadmaps" that the EU gave them last year are still valid, and they are still perfectly doable if the authorities in these two countries put their full will into delivering now.

If Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina keep up the pace of reforms and thus meet the conditions the Commission could envisage making a new proposal by mid-2010.

The speed of these countries' progress towards visa-free travel is in the hands of their own leaders.

Concerning Kosovo. Kosovo under UNSCR 1244 has not been part of the present visa dialogue. For this reason and also because of security concerns about the issuance of breeder documents and new Serbian passports to people residing in Kosovo under UNSCR 1244, these persons will also remain under the visa obligation.

Let me underline that this is a purely technical decision based on security concerns in full respect of UNSCR 1244. It is therefore a status neutral proposal.

Here we are – a very important day and I trust that this proposal should be adopted by the EU member states by the end of this year after we have also consulted the European Parliament.

Question: BiH – are there other requirements than biometric passports? If you make a proposal in 2010 for Albania and BiH when would they get visa free travel?

VP Barrot : Pour la Bosnie Herzégovine, c'est vrai que la distribution de passeports biométriques devrait commencer dans les prochains mois. Il faut évidemment ajouter l'évaluation des progrès fait sur les autres critères que j'ai énuméré . A savoir la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé. Nous allons évaluer au fur et à mesure les progrès qui sont déjà réel mais qui doivent être encore confirmé. Pour l'Albanie, je dois dire d'ailleurs que moi-même j'ai été , il y a quelques temps distribué le premier passeport biométrique à Tirana. Là aussi, il faut bien comprendre que notre dialogue va se poursuivre. Nous souhaitons bien sûr ne pas trop faire attendre les citoyens de Bosnie Herzégovine et les citoyens d'Albanie. Nous allons évidemment stimuler autant que possible les ministres concernés pour que tout cela progresse rapidement pour que nous puissions éventuellement faire une proposition pour une année prochaine.

Question: Question to Commissioner Rehn on perception in Kosovo that after the Feasibility Study is published this autumn you will start the dialogue with Kosovo on visas. Can you explain? Question to VP Barrot on your proposal doesn't apply for residents in Kosovo, is it the same rule for residents with Serbian passports in Republika Srpska?

Commissioner Rehn: Thank you for your question concerning Kosovo. I already explained the reasons why Kosovo under 1244 is not part of the present dialogue on visa liberalisation. Because of security concerns this is a purely technical decision. However, this does not mean that Kosovo is forgotten. The Commission and the EU remains strongly committed to its European perspective. Already now a number of practical steps facilitating travel are being implemented in practice. The existing EU rules on visa that are applicable for Kosovo as for the rest of the region, enable member states to take a flexible approach on a case by case basis. We understand this flexibility is to some extent exercised by some member states. This autumn, as you said, the Commission will indeed issue a study on ways and means to further Kosovo's political and socio-economical development as well as its European perspective and certainly the visa issue will also be addressed in this context.

VP Barrot: Je réponds brièvement. Il y a un accord bilatéral qui date de Mai 2003 entre la Serbie et la Bosnie Herzégovine qui définit les modalités d'acquisition de la citoyenneté entre ces deux pays. Sur la base des informations transmises en Mai 2009 par les autorités Serbes, il n'y a que 2557 citoyens bosniaques qui ont été naturalisés Serbes ces dernières années. Donc on voit que le problème est extrêmement limité, et de toute façon comme nous escomptons bien là aussi aller rapidement vers la libéralisation des visas, je crois qu'on trouvera là aussi les solutions appropriées.

Question: Kosovo – Commissioner Rehn explained why Kosovo is not part of the dialogue. But the press release says, Kosovo is not fulfilling the requirements. We don't understand what Kosovo proposed a roadmap? What did it not meet? Another question is if security issues are such a big concern in Kosovo how comes that Kosovo has NATO controlling the border and such a successful mission as EULEX?

Commissioner Rehn: Thank you. I already responded twice to this question essentially. It is indeed the case that Kosovo under UNSCR 1244 is not part of the present dialogue on visa liberalisation. In addition to that as the press release apparently states Kosovo is not meeting the conditions – this is an objective fact. Because of security concerns. As you refer to EULEX it is indeed important that the cooperation between Serbia and EULEX, is an important element of the effective control of the boundary line with Kosovo and it is also of utmost importance for fighting organised crime in the region and it is also part of the roadmap benchmarks concerning Serbia, which was already underlined in the assessment report of the Commission.

Question: Turkey we heard that the Commission is working on a new proposal for visa liberalisation with Turkey. Can you elaborate on this issue?

Commissioner Rehn: I would rather not.

VP Barrot:

Question: How will this proposal be received by the Council? Last week Commissioner Barrot mentioned some problems with the Pays-Bas because of cooperation with ICTY. And also do you expect problems with the countries that do not recognise Kosovo? Do you have any study on how many more people will be coming to the EU following this visa liberalisation?

VP Barrot: Je réponds d'abord que nous avons vraiment fait un travail d'évaluation très sérieux et que je suis confiant sur la manière dont les ministres de l'intérieur répondront aux propositions de la commission.

Commissioner Rehn: Je suis tout à fait d'accord avec ce que tu as dit. In addition to that concerning the country you refer to – the Netherlands – my understanding is on the basis of very clear statements by the representatives of the government of the Netherlands is that they are fully supportive of this kind of visa liberalisation with rigorous conditionality and I am grateful for that, of course. We share the same goal of the Europeanisation of the civil societies of the Western Balkans and thus this is a very important day and very important instrument in order to advance this goal of

social and human integration of the Western Balkans and its citizens which I trust, all the EU member states support.

VP Barrot: Non. Il est vraisemblable que les échanges vont s'accroître considérablement soit comme l'a très bien dit Olli, soit pour des raisons de voyage de familles mais aussi pour des voyages d'affaires. Les relations vont s'intensifier car c'est vrai que le passeport biométrique apporte des solutions très simple. Il n'y a plus en effet à déboursier de l'argent pour avoir le visa et il n'y a pas de formalité administrative à remplir. Donc nous n'avons pas en effet une étude d'impact mais nous savons que là où il y a libéralisation des visas, c'est-à-dire suppression des visas, bien évidemment les échanges sont beaucoup plus fréquents et beaucoup plus facile. Notamment pour la jeune génération. Et j'aime bien la formule d'Olli Rehn, il faut européeniser la société civile et notamment la jeunesse. Ca c'est très important.

Question: To stay on the bilateral issues, do you expect any problems with the Macedonian passports?

Commissioner Rehn: I refer to our previous responses that Jacques Barrot and I gave. On the basis of our initial and first round of consultations with the EU member states, my reading is that there is a broadly supportive position by all EU member states, because this proposal on visa free travel is really based on rigorous conditionality. As Jacques said, the biometric passport and other conditions are very rigorous and they ensure security of the EU and its citizens. At the same time, on the other hand our goal really is the Europeanisation of the civil societies so it is a long-term objective and my understanding is that all EU member states support this way of thinking that we have to see the long-term that we have to support the Europeanisation of civil societies and not link it to other some issues than the security and technical concerns that we have included in the visa dialogue.

Question: sur la possibilité pour les Serbes de Bosnie d'obtenir des passeports de Belgrade.Ce qui serait discriminatoire pour les musulmans.

VP Barrot: Oui mais j'observe que la Bosnie Herzégovine n'a pas encore de passeports biométriques. Si nous avons proposé de faire entrer la Bosnie Herzégovine dès maintenant dans la suppression des visas, à coup sûr nous n'aurions pas eu l'approbation du conseil. Il faut accepter d'avancer étape par étape. Et dans la mesure où la Bosnie Herzégovine n'a pas encore distribué tout ses passeports biométriques ce n'est pas encore possible. Nous avons la volonté de raccourcir le plus possible le délais entre le moment de la libéralisation des passeports pour les trois pays balkaniques et les deux autres.

Question: Could you comment from political point of view the common feeling within the Bosniaks, first of all, thanks to their government and with the helping hand of this decision the ethnic division of the country was finalised, and starting from first January next year Bosnians will be in a ghetto. Technically speaking Ratko Mladic will be able to travel freely while the victims and the families of the victims will be punished again.

Commissioner Rehn: I am not very fond of making jokes about ghettos or Ratko Mladic. It is, as Jacques Barrot said, very clear that BiH has not yet, in a serious

manner, introduced biometric passports. The country is lagging behind in critical reforms and decisions which are necessary as conditions for visa-free travel. BiH unfortunately has wasted time in nationalistic rhetoric in recent years, and not in conducting the necessary reforms to the benefit of citizens and their visa-free travel. So now it is really in the hands of the leaders of the country to keep up the momentum which has been gained recently, complete the reforms and finish the work so that we could make a recommendation on visa-free travel for BiH by mid-2010. This kind of delay of few months is not dramatic for a country in case the country now conducts the reforms and meets the conditions for visa-free travel in the near future.

Question: in French on fragmentation (Czech/Slovak example).

Commissioner Rehn: I think is a matter of another kind of discussion, rather constitutional and institutional question of the EU. It is an important issue but we live in the real world and we have certain number of countries in Europe. Concerning Czechoslovakia, concerning Slovakia, former Yugoslavia, we have to live with that and make the kind of proposals that are viable and feasible to advance social and economic progress, in this case visa-free travel in this real world to which I'm referring to.

Question: There are amendments in the case of Serbia, those that have not been met yet, and there's one important goal you are asking in the case of BiH, the implementation of biometric passports, which started in Sarajevo as of 1st July as a test-phase. So why didn't you follow that track to give them a chance to finalise the procedure with the rest of the countries?

There's an open letter signed also by Schwartz-Schilling saying that with that politics you are more and more dividing BiH because the Serbs will be able to travel freely especially the ones living in the area of Srebrenica, could you comment on this harsh criticism?

VP Barrot:

Commissioner Rehn: Concerning the article of Swartz-Schilling, I think it's part of healthy and democratic debate on the EU's relations with the BiH. I need to point out that granting visa-free travel to any country is not a matter of a simple political decision. The Schengen area is a common space of free circulation between 28 states. To ensure the security of the citizens living in that area the highest security standards must apply, especially at the external borders. Unfortunately we are not sure that this has been met by BiH or by Albania. They have the same conditions as the others. Once they meet these conditions, they can reach this goal of visa-free travel. I trust Mr S-S knows well that there have been some wasted years in the last couple of years in BiH when too much time has been consumed by nationalistic rhetoric instead of taking serious political decisions for the benefit of the citizens of BiH.

Question: On Serbia, VP Barrot mentioned that there might be a report by Serbian government the end of September. So what precisely do you expect Serbian government to do in the meantime so that the visa-liberalisation can continue as

planned, what are the remaining benchmarks and where are the remaining concerns?

VP Barrot:

Question: According to the latest decision by the ECJ, Turkish citizens could travel without visa as well. Commission's decision to lift the visa for certain countries citizens but not Turkish citizens raises questions within the Turkish society. Do you have message to Turkish public regarding the issue? Is there a roadmap for Turkish visa-liberalisation?

VP Barrot:

Question: Would it not have been more cautious to hold all countries back until all conditions had been met by all countries? This current approach is resulting in a feeling of injustice in the countries.

Commissioner Rehn: This sense of injustice is confusion and not correct, at least concerning the EU. It is unjust maybe because of the lack of some concrete decisions by the countries concerned, in this case Albania and BiH. I trust they will now keep up the momentum which has been regained in the recent months and thus they could be able to meet the conditions for visa-free travel in the course of 2010, preferably by mid-2010. We can't punish the other citizens of the WB because of slow motion in some other countries. We base our assessment on own merits in the countries concerned.

Question: VP Barrot, you said recently that Europe has to show true solidarity on immigration and asylum problem. Could you please define this true solidarity and obstacles reaching it?

VP Barrot: