

Communication

JOINT STATEMENT BY VICE PRESIDENT FRANCO FRATTINI COMMISSIONER RESPONSIBLE FOR JUSTICE FREEDOM AND SECURITY AND BY COMMISSIONER OLLI REHN RESPONSIBLE FOR ENLARGEMENT ON THE ADOPTION OF VISA FACILITATION AND READMISSION MANDATES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

“We welcome the adoption today by the Council of mandates for the Commission to negotiate Community visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. This step reflects the commitment by the EU to promoting people-to-people contacts between the Western Balkans and the Union. It is really good news for the citizens in the region and a tangible proof of what the European perspective can offer.”- stated Vice-President Franco Frattini and Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn.

The overall aim of the agreements is to make it easier for citizens of Western Balkan countries, in particular those who travel most, to acquire visas for the EU whilst simultaneously having clear rules on combating illegal immigration. Within the framework of the Visa Facilitation agreement, we will negotiate reduction of the handling fees for all Western Balkan citizens. Furthermore for certain categories of persons, that will be determined jointly with our negotiating partners, we will simplify the necessary documentary evidence, make it possible for them to obtain multi-entry visas with long periods of validity and exempt them from handling fees. The agreements on readmission will set out clear obligations and procedures for the authorities of both the Western Balkan countries and EU Member State as to when and how to take back people who are illegally residing on their territories.

The conclusion of visa facilitation agreements will be a concrete step forward along the path set out by the Thessaloniki agenda. Visa facilitation should encourage the Western Balkan countries to implement relevant reforms and reinforce their cooperation at regional level and with the EU in areas such as strengthening the rule of law, fighting organised crime and corruption, and increasing their administrative capacity in border control and security of documents by introducing biometric data. The conclusion of visa facilitation agreements is linked to the conclusion of readmission agreements which will contribute to combating illegal migration.

Vice President Franco Frattini announced his intention to initiate the negotiation process, inviting all Western Balkan countries in a first round of negotiations in Brussels, envisaged for 30 November 30, 2006. The Commission will strive to conclude the negotiations as soon as possible, and before the end of June 2007 at the latest.