

THE NEW YORK TIMES

May 27, 2010

E.U. Offers Visa-Free Travel to 2 Balkan Nations

By **STEPHEN CASTLE** and **JUDY DEMPSEY**

BRUSSELS — Two more countries were offered the prospect of visa-free travel throughout most of the European Union on Thursday, in a move designed to help stabilize the Balkans and calm nationalist tensions that some fear threaten the break-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A year after they were left off a list of Balkans nations granted easier access to most of western Europe, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina won the concession Thursday and were praised for upgrading the security of their passports and tightening borders.

The European Commission, the E.U. executive body, recommended that citizens of the two countries be able to travel using biometric passports, but not visas, to a total of 28 nations that are either inside Europe's free-travel Schengen zone or aspire to join it. Biometric data include fingerprints and a facial image.

All 27 E.U. countries and the European Parliament will have to approve the proposal, and the European Commission did not give a date for when the new arrangements could start.

The move will be watched closely by an international community that has struggled to foster political change in Bosnia and Herzegovina despite trying hardheaded "tough love" policies and offering inducements like the eventual prospect of E.U. membership.

Supporters of the plan said that the lure of visa-free travel for its citizens had forced Bosnia and Herzegovina's fractious politicians to work together.

However, the proposal is not without some risk for policy makers and could provoke disquiet in some European countries where immigration is an increasingly contentious issue.

Cecilia Malmstrom, the E.U. commissioner for home affairs, said that lessons had been learned from previous visa liberalization exercises where the number of asylum seekers had increased.

She said the offer of visa-free travel had brought change in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania; both, she said, now had better passport security, stronger border controls and better structures to fight organized crime and corruption.

Several technical tasks still have to be fulfilled, but assuming the measure wins backing, the liberalization will apply to all E.U. nations except Britain and Ireland. Switzerland, Norway and

Iceland, which are not E.U. members but are part of the Schengen zone, will also take part, the commission said.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which faces elections in the autumn, is divided into two barely functioning administrative entities: a Muslim-Croat Federation and a Serb Republic led by Milorad Dodic, whose nationalist rhetoric has caused concern among Western diplomats.

Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society Institute in Brussels, said that the policy of offering visa-free travel — something much sought after by citizens — had made Bosnian politicians work together.

“It has really produced results on border security and police cooperation,” she said. “It has forced the entities to work together on a practical level.”

She added that Italy and Greece had backed the changes even though they might receive more migrants from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The visa system had proved ineffective at controlling cross-border movements, with those determined to travel easily finding their way around it. The introduction of biometric passports will provide a better prospect of keeping track of travelers from these countries, Ms. Grabbe said.

Osman Topcagic, the Bosnian ambassador to the European Union, said the country’s failure to win visa-free travel in Europe last year caused a “big disappointment,” adding that “it was quickly recognized by the public that we need to do our homework.”

He conceded that in the Serb Republic some political developments were not moving in the “right direction” but said he hoped this would change after the elections.

The decision Thursday coincided with a report warning of the risks the European Union runs if it fails to honor a pledge it made in 2003 to allow Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia closer ties.

The report, published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, contends that a lack of European engagement could put a brake on reforms and reduce public support in the region for E.U. membership.

Several E.U. member states say that the last thing they need are new, poor members that would also bring into the bloc unresolved border disputes and a reputation for corruption.

There is also enlargement fatigue, not helped by the admission in 2007 of Bulgaria and Romania, which commission officials acknowledged at the time were not ready to join the bloc.

The other risk is that by postponing negotiations on E.U. membership, reformers in the region will be weakened in their attempts to build more democratic structures.

“The promise of E.U. integration is the political glue that until now has held the Balkans together,” the report says. “Recent progress on peace and stability in the region could be undermined.”

Since Central and East European countries joined the European Union in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania, the requirements for completing the accession talks have become much more rigorous. Using this approach, none of the Western Balkan countries could even begin to start accession talks before 2012 or be ready to join the bloc by 2020.

Judy Dempsey reported from Berlin.