

# European Bloc Opens Borders to the Balkans

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BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — The European Union opened its borders to more than 10 million Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians on Saturday after nearly 20 years of demanding visas, a major advance for closer ties with the 27-nation bloc.

All three western Balkan nations celebrated the lifting of visas with fireworks, concerts and all-night festivities, recognizing a significant milestone for citizens who have long felt shunned by the rest of Europe.

“We should all remember this day,” said Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic of Serbia. “Finally, the same rules that apply for others apply for us as well.”

The Montenegrin prime minister, Milo Djukanovic, described the move as “the happiest news this year.” But Mr. Djukanovic also warned that “hard work lies ahead” before the tiny nation could fulfill its goal of becoming a European Union member.

In the Macedonian capital, Skopje, a huge countdown clock was posted at a central square where thousands attended a concert with D.J.’s and pop singers. At midnight, Champagne corks popped in a toast to the end of what many in the region thought was a humiliation.

“This is a great day, a very important day for Macedonia,” Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski said.

Champagne toasts were also held during a midnight flight to Brussels, the seat of the European Union, as Serbia’s deputy prime minister, Bozidar Djelic, accompanied some 50 Serbs to their first trip ever to a country in the bloc.

“I am not sure if I am dreaming or not; they gave us such a nice welcome,” one passenger told Serbian state television upon landing.

At the border with Hungary, several hundred Serbs braved freezing weather to cross just minutes after midnight.

“We are finally free,” said a smiling student from Subotica.

The citizens from the former Yugoslavia had previously enjoyed free travel to other European nations, but visa requirements and fees were introduced as the federation was breaking up and going to war in 1991.

The policy forced residents to wait in long lines for visas at embassies.

Even as the new free travel policy brought joy to many, some said it would do little good because of the region's widespread poverty and economic hardship.

"It's a joke," said Jelena Cavic, a 42-year-old archaeologist from Belgrade. "I can only dream about Europe."

Still, travel agents in Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro all have reported a surge in bookings for New Year's holidays after European Union ministers announced the change earlier this month.