



EUROPEAN COMMISSION VICE PRESIDENT FRANCO FRATTINI VISITS ALBANIA ON VISA LIBERALIZATION

European Commissions Vice President Franco Frattini, in charge of Justice, Freedom and Security, launched a dialogue on visa liberalization with Albania during his visit in Tirana, on March 7th. This process aims at achieving the common goal which is the free movement of citizens. Mr. Frattini said that he came to Albania in person “to bring to its citizens a strong, positive political message from the European Union”. Moreover this dialogue will foster the promotion of people mobility between the EU and the Western Balkan countries as a key element towards closer cooperation with the countries in the region.

Vice President Frattini underlined the message that the perspective for visa liberalisation is clear and encouraging, but it needs a lot of work to get there, since Albania must meet some important conditions in order to benefit from the visa liberalization. According to Mr. Frattini: “First, full implementation of the existing agreements is required, particularly the agreement on readmission of illegal migrants and the agreement on visa facilitation. On this point, in order to

avoid any incoherence and discrepancy in implementation, the Commission has provided to all consulates of all member states common guidelines for the implementation of the visa facilitation agreement, apart from the clear and practical information our ambassador has put on the website of EC Delegation here in Tirana. The second point is the security of documents. I know from the Prime Minister and from the Minister of Interior that Albania will very soon start issuing biometric passports. Albania is also establishing electronic civil status register. The third point is continuation of cooperation in fighting organized crime,” he said.

The Albanian authorities were highly enthusiastic. They considered the opening of this dialogue as an historic moment and expressed their determination to implement every decision, law or reform needed to achieve the final goal. The Prime Minister Sali Berisha explained: “Albania is in the process of providing the Albanian citizens with the most advanced and high standards identity cards and passports. We are totally

digitalizing the civil status register; we are establishing a new system of addresses; we have launched an integrated control of borders and soon we will install the first scanner for our customs’ offices to install it further to the other border points. The Government will make every effort to counter illegal traffics, as zero-tolerance against organized crime will remain our motto. The Government will sign every agreement on cooperation, extradition and any other kind of agreement with the EU member countries and will implement them with the greatest seriousness,” he said.

European Commission Vice President underlined another important element during his stay in Tirana. Mr. Franco Frattini said “now that everything depends on the pace of the reforms and the performance of the Albanian authorities”, but he felt positive when he expressed the view that “results can be achieved in a very short time. My personal wish is that achievement of important results will become possible before the end of the term of the Barroso Commission”.

Barroso’s message of condolence on Gerdec Tragedy



On the 15th of March an army base ammunition dump in, Gerdec near the Albanian capital Tirana blew off in a series of blasts causing the death of 26 persons and massive destruction in infrastructure. The Albanian authorities received numerous messages of condolence. The Prime Minister Sali Berisha received a message of condolence from the President of the European Commission. Mr. Jose Manuel Barroso wrote that: “I heard about the terrible explosion of ammunition in

the depot of Gerdec village, when many persons died and some 300 others were injured. Allow me to convey you my condolences and those of the EC,” he said. The EC President expressed as well his full support and solidarity with the families of all the casualties. Mr Barroso underlined as well the fact that the “The European Commission stands ready to support Albania in the aftermath of this tragic incident.”

Western Balkans: enhancing the European perspective

New initiatives approved to support the economical and political development

The European Commission adopted a number of new initiatives and enhanced the existing ones to support the political and economic development in the countries of the Western Balkans. Presenting them in Brussels on March 5th., Mr. Ollie Rehn, the European Enlargement Commissioner underlined that "its aim is to accelerate the progress of these countries on the road towards EU membership. 2008 will be a crucial year for the Western Balkans". Announcing major proposals for European Union assistance for the region he went on to explain that: "The measures prove the EU's strong commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Within the EU, there is an unwavering will to support the people of the Western Balkans in opting for European values and living standards. However, it is the leaders and people of the region who will determine whether their countries, through reforms, will move decisively towards a European future, marked by increased stability and prosperity." – said Commissioner Rehn.

He went on to explain that the EU apart from mobilising all available policy instruments to support the region's progress through new initiatives "we also send short political messages to each of the countries, pointing to areas that are of importance for their further steps on the road towards eventual EU membership". It is time to move towards visa-free travel to the EU for citizens of the Western Balkans. The Commission

is starting a dialogue with all western Balkan countries concerned to establish the conditions to be met for lifting the visa requirement.

Among the new initiatives, Commissioner Rehn listed the following: "We shall further increase the number of scholarships granted to students from the Western Balkans to study in the EU. EU support to civil society development and dialogue will increase substantially. More EU programmes and agencies are also being opened to the countries of the Western Balkans, enabling contacts and cooperation between scientific and educational institutions. The Commission will continue its support to a more intensive cooperation in the areas of science and research, education, culture, youth, employment policy and social issues, environment protection and in the field of justice, freedom and security," he said.

Having in mind the problematic past the Enlargement Commissioner underlined another important message. According to Mr. Rehn: "Enhanced regional cooperation is essential for the political, economic and social development of the western Balkans. The Commission will continue to support the Regional Cooperation Council and other cooperation frameworks such as the new Central European Free Trade Agreement, the Energy Community Treaty and the Agreement on a European Common Aviation Area. It also proposes the negotiation of a Western Balkan

Transport Community Treaty," he said.

Continued EU financial assistance is supporting the reform process and the overall development of the Western Balkans, through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). The average annual allocation for the western Balkans under IPA for the period 2007-2011 is approximately 800 million. This is by far the highest per capita amount provided by the Commission to any region in the world. Increased coordination between the Commission, International Financial Institutions and bilateral donors is crucial for maximizing the economic and social development impact of grants and loans to the Western Balkans.

Mr. Rehn concluded that all these measures are taken as: "It is in the interest of the EU and of Europe, as a whole, that the region should go ahead with political and economic reform, reconciliation among peoples and progress towards the EU. Throughout their transformation the Commission is giving particular priority to strengthening the rule of law, good governance, judicial and administrative reform, people to people contacts and the development of civil society. Over the past two years, the countries of the Western Balkans have moved closer to the EU. This reflects progress, albeit uneven, in reforms and in meeting the conditions. However, they are facing a number of challenges in 2008 which have far-reaching implications for their security, stability and well-being," he said.

Ambassador Helmuth Lohan explains the significance of the new initiatives for Albania



The Head of the European Commission Delegation to Albania, Ambassador Helmuth Lohan

Following the presentation of EC new initiatives by the Enlargement Commissioner to support the political and economic development in the countries of the Western Balkans in Brussels the Head of the EC Delegation to Albania, Ambassador Helmuth Lohan explained in a press conference to the Albanian media their significance.

"More support for the free movement of the Albanian citizens, an increased number of scholarships for the Albanian students who would prefer to pursue their studies in Universities of EU Member States, financial support for the Albanian infrastructure, the civil society are just a few of the

new initiatives that the Council of Ministers of the European Union is expected to approve shortly in the framework of its new initiative to better support its enlargement policy with countries from the Western Balkans," he said. Analyzing these incentives the Head of the EC Delegation in Albania went on saying that "2008 is a year of great significance for all the states of this region". According to Mr. Helmuth Lohan "these countries should increase their efforts to deepen and speed up the reforms that have already started". He added that he was encouraged by the progress marked so far in Albania but stressed the need to complete the reforms.

"The European Commission is asking from Albania to carry on the successful implementation of the reforms that derive from the Stabilization and Association Agreement signed with the European Commission. It should guarantee that the new elections are free and fair in full conformity with the European standards, to strengthen and consolidate the rule of law and to improve the business climate and free competition," said Mr. Lohan.

The Head of the EC Delegation in Albania said further that: "The document analyses the actual

situation Albania finds itself in. The Albanian authorities have shown good will in achieving progress in fulfilling all the needed standards. They have taken good and concrete steps in implementing the Interim Agreement and the SAA. Nonetheless, we do encourage the political leadership of the country to better improve the climate of trust and cooperation so as to accomplish a number of key reforms like the electoral one, the strengthening of the rule of law and the fight against organized crime and corruption," said Ambassador Lohan.

Speaking about the contradictions between the main political forces and the smaller parties on the electoral reform he felt convinced that they will be solved in due time following an intensive and constructive dialogue. "The spirit of cooperation among the political forces is already in place and I am sure that the mutual agreement on the electoral reform will be achieved on time, well ahead of the 2009 general elections. The electoral system should be solved by the Albanian political parties. They should behave responsibly and should demonstrate in front of all the EU member states that they know how to conduct free and fair elections."

POLITICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN EU TROIKA – ALBANIA



Top level representatives from the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the Albanian government met on March 11th in Brussels to discuss the relations between the European Union and Albania. They analyzed in details the steps that Tirana has taken so far and the ones it will make in the near future on its way towards EU integration.

Mr. Javier Solana, EU High Representative, who chaired the Troika, welcomed Albania's commitment in implementing the necessary reforms, but underlined the need for deeper efforts in the process of reforming a number of specific areas like economy, judiciary and the fight against corruption and organized crime. "For us it has been encouraging the manner in which Albania is tackling the problems

of the country, the process of reforms in many fields from the economy to the judiciary, to the fight against organized crime, etc. I would like to welcome the work the Foreign Minister has set in front of us and to tell this is the way in which Albania has to continue," said Mr. Solana.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Albania, assured the hosts that the government is committed to continue in the path of reforms. Mr. Lulzim Basha expressed the view that the country is ready to face and overcome every challenge that comes up in the road ahead. "All our efforts are focused towards one objective which is the main objective of Albania; which is membership to the EU. There is a clear road and there is a roadmap

in this regard. We are very happy with the ratification process of SAA and the evaluations that we are getting here. We are fully committed to make the reforms and the efforts that are needed to this path to be walked as soon as possible. We are aware of challenges and are working to tackle them as effectively as possible," said the Albanian Foreign Minister.

While discussing the regional issues, following the independence of Kosova, Mr. Javier Solana asked the Albanian government "to carry on with the constructive cooperation in order to stabilize the Balkans and produce an atmosphere in the region that will help the whole region to get closer to the EU".

JOINT READMISSION COMMITTEE

A Joint Readmission Committee meeting with representatives from the European Commission, Member States and Albanian institutions directly involved in readmission matters was held on March 6th in Tirana. The meeting was chaired by the Albanian Minister of Integration, Mrs. Majlinda Bregu and the Head of the EC Delegation, Ambassador Helmut Lohan.

The Head of EC Delegation to Albania was quite straightforward when he underlined the message that joint efforts are needed towards the better implementation of this important agreement that has entered into force almost two years ago. Ambassador Helmut Lohan said that: "The job of this Readmission Committee will not be only to monitor the implementation of this Agreement, but will consist as well in the

implementation of some improvements that will be necessary for a complete and successful implementation. At the same time the Joint Committee can decide to change some annexes and will play a significant role in the implementation of bilateral protocols". Mr. Lohan added as well that this Committee can function as a Joint Committee even for the implementation of the Visa Facilitation Agreement, which should according to him "should be well monitored".

The Albanian EU Integration Minister Majlinda Bregu said that the Albanian authorities have taken a number of concrete measures so far. "We have prepared many Legal amendments, have signed bilateral agreements and protocols of implementation with EU member states and third countries; have implemented

almost all the needed structural and organizational changes; have trained the staff involved in readmission issues and have established the right procedures and provision with adequate conditions for the returned who resided without permission in EU member states," she said.

Nonetheless, the Albanian EU Integration Minister underlined the fact that the Albanian government is fully aware of the fact that it needs to tackle many other significant tasks. "We shall check the implementation of the agreement; we shall implement all the necessary measures for equal implementation in order to ensure the regular exchange of information on protocols for implementation drafted by some Member States and Albania," said Mrs. Bregu.

EU supports the Albanian Vocational Schools in introducing information system



Dirk Lange at the inauguration of the EU funded project "Schools Management Information System"

A brand new project "Schools Management Information System" funded by the EU that is implemented for the first time ever in Albania, was inaugurated on 13th March 2008 in the Professional School "Beqir Çela" in Shkozë, Durrës. Worth 38,000 it is financed under the "Innovation Fund for Vocational Education and Training schools and centres" of the 2004, CARDS programme. The total investment is 500,000. The significance of this unique project was shown by the present at the inauguration ceremony of the Head of the Unit responsible for Albania at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement, Mr. Dirk Lange.

The project aimed at improving the school administration through ensuring reliability, accuracy and time efficiency of the school statistical data system, which includes data storage and data processing. It strengthens the linkage between the VET sector and the private one through offering it a highly trained service on VET students as future employees. Another priority is to improve teachers' skills through training of the "Beqir Çela" school in the usage of SMIS and acquisition of basic computer schools. The Implementation of the SMIS software will be supported by 30 PCs, 1 Workstation and 1 Server to be installed along with the creation and configuration of the computer network of this school. Another added value lies in the fact that the system will be available to the wider public including a user and administration guide of the SMIS software.

The Director of "Beqir Çela" Professional

School is extremely pleased with the results of the project. Mr. Bujar Shkëmbi, a dedicated teacher, is grateful to the Delegation of the EU in Albania. "Their vision and financial assistance made possible the introduction of this modern informational technology. All our classrooms are now connected to the main server, thus giving access to all the teaching staff and the administration. It helps them to coordinate and monitor the work and the performance of everybody involved. The daily performance can be easily traced in our internal service. In the near future we plan to have our own website. It will help all parents better monitor the performance of their children and on the other side will help the employers find perspective employees among our students," he said.

The high EU official expressed his satisfaction that Albania is making concrete steps in encouraging the development of this important sector of the educational system and reconfirmed the will of the European Union to stand by its side. Mr. Dirk Lange said that: "As part of its European integration agenda, Albania is also stepping up efforts to improve the education system, including the creation of a modern Vocational Education and Training. I am very pleased that with the support of the European Commission, Albania has now made strides in establishing a VET system in line with European standards", said Mr. Lange.

This project started on 16 July 2007 and was successfully completed on 16 February 2008.

Notice on the national competition for the design of the EU mascot for kids



In the framework of the European Week 2008, from 2-9 May 2008, the Delegation of the EC in Albania launches a National Competition for the Design of an EU Mascot for Children in Albania. The purpose of this initiative is to draw the attention of the public and especially of the younger generation and children to the integration process of Albania towards the EU. The final event of this competition will be the opening of an exhibition of all submitted mascot-ideas, that will be organised on 7th May at the Gallery of the Faculty of the Visual Arts (Academy of Fine Arts).

The winning mascot-design will be used as a symbol and main character through all public information campaigns and activities of the EC Delegation in Albania dedicated to children and youth. The submitted mascot-designs for the National Competition will be evaluated by a jury composed of professional artists, members of the international community in Albania and a child.

Participants in the competition:

Invited to participate in this competition are painters, sculptors and designers, students of the Academy of Fine Arts in Tirana, students of artistic art schools in Albania and children from schools throughout the country.

Award of the best work: The jury will award the winning mascot-idea with a price of 4.000 EURO. The second and the third prize of the competition will be awarded with 500 Euro.

Application deadline:

The Application deadline is April 28, 2008.

All the applications should be submitted to:

The Delegation of the European Commission to Albania

Rruga e Durrësit, 127/1,

Tirana

For further information about the application criteria and to download competition application forms, please consult the EC delegation in Albania web page at: www.delalb.ec.europa.eu or call one of the following telephone numbers: + 355 4 22 28 320, + 355 4 22 28 479, + 355 69 20 82

Please visit the websites below or contact the Delegation of the European Commission to Tirana

www.delalb.ec.europa.eu

www.europa.eu

www.ec.europa.eu/enlargement

www.eu2008.si

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