

REQUEST TO THE EU MEMBER STATES AND WESTERN BALKANS LEADERS: ENABLE THE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR ALL THE WESTERN BALKAN CITIZENS

5 JULY 2021

We, the undersigned organisations and individuals from the Western Balkans and European Union are urging the WB6 governments and the European Union Member State leaders to act swiftly in abolishing the visa regimes and establishing the freedom of movement for all Western Balkan citizens travelling within the region and throughout the Schengen area.

The existing barriers to freedom of movement within the region and throughout the Schengen area have been breaking family ties, harming businesses, inhibiting student and academic exchange, and preventing regional cooperation and development.

The movement of WB6 citizens inside the region continues to be challenging due to passport restrictions, as in the case of travelling between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Governments need to understand that roads, tunnels and railways will not serve WB6 countries fully unless provisions are facilitating the free movement of people, goods and services inside the region.

Similarly, opportunities for WB6 citizens are much more limited when it comes to contributing to and benefiting from regional projects but also to larger EU programs which have proven to be beneficial for students, researchers and young entrepreneurs — such as the Erasmus+ Program — offering life-changing experiences to EU citizens. When such opportunities are present, they tend to be available only to people in the Western Balkan region whose passport allows them to travel more easily, without going through the lengthy and costly procedures of acquiring a Schengen visa.

Passport restrictions and visa regimes within the region are significant obstacles that have to be resolved urgently. The upcoming Western Balkan Summit in Berlin is a major opportunity for abolishing the visa regime and enabling the freedom of movement in the region.

Exploring the potential of human capital within the Berlin Process has been vital, which enabled the involvement of youth and civil society as promoters of social change and seen as an investment in people's mobility. EU support has often been missing this social aspect, which can have a meaningful and sustainable impact on citizens and societies.

Visa liberalisation benefiting the five Western Balkan countries since 2009 was the biggest incentive to the economic development of the region. After the introduction of the visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans, the trade of the region with the EU increased almost two and a half times.

However, citizens of Kosovo remain the only ones in the region that need a visa to travel to the Schengen area. Despite the fact that in 2018 the European Commission confirmed that Kosovo had fulfilled all the benchmarks of the visa liberalisation roadmap, and the European Parliament has voted in favour of the Commission's proposal, the latter is still pending in the European Council.

The EU should take a responsible role and preserve its credibility in the region by delivering on its promises given to Kosovo citizens and grant visa liberalisation to Kosovo this year. By granting visa liberalisation to all citizens of the Western Balkan region, the EU would be fulfilling on its promise, and delivering on its core value - the freedom of movement.

Signatories alphabetically (1/3):

1. Afrim Maliqi, Director of HANDIKOS - Association of paraplegics and paralysed children of Kosovo
2. Agim Qehaja, Human Care, Kosovo
3. Albana Hoti, TROJA - Together Realizing Our Ambitions, Kosovo
4. Albana Veseli, Board Member of the Western Balkans Alumni Association, Kosovo
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6. Anida Šabanović, Director of the Foreign Policy Initiative BH, Bosnia and Herzegovina
7. Anto Janković, President of the Center for Economic Prosperity and Freedom – CEPS, Montenegro
8. Antonio Mihajlov, Senior Adviser at the Subversive Front, North Macedonia
9. Arben Hajrullahu, Executive Director of the Center for Political Courage, Kosovo
10. Arianit Jashari, Access, Kosovo
11. Arjeta Maka, Activist at the NGO "Divine Woman" NGO, Kosovo
12. Astrit Istrefi, Executive Director, The Balkan Forum
13. Aulonë Memeti, Executive Director of Admove, Kosovo
14. Avdyl Gashi, Director of the Global Shapers Community Prishtina, Kosovo
15. Avni Dervishi, Head of Global Sector for Diaspora Power, Sweden
16. Azra Berbić, Program Coordinator at the Post-Conflict Research Center, Bosnia and Herzegovina
17. Bajram Ilazi, Executive Director of the Bashkimi Rinor E Ardhmja E Nditur, Kosovo
18. Bashkim Ibishi, Director of the Advancing Together, Kosovo
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23. Cristoph Lüttmann, Managing Director of the CSSP Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation, Germany
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27. Dragana Dardić, Executive Director of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina
28. Drita Shabani, MSc. in professional studies for public administration, Engineer of Architecture, Kosovo
29. Egzona Bokshi, Civil Society Activist, Kosovo
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Signatories alphabetically (2/3):

31. Emina Kuhinja, Researcher at the Foreign Policy Initiative BH, Bosnia and Herzegovina
32. Emrah Cermjani, Executive Director of the Roma in Action NGO, Kosovo
33. Erblin Hoxha, Executive Director of the Debate Center, Kosovo
34. Erhard Busek, Chairman of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, Austria
35. Fikrije Ferizi, Executive Director of the OJQ Qendra e Gruas "ATO", Kosovo
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37. Françeska Muço, Executive Director of the Young Professionals Network, Albanian Youth Representative in the Governing Board of RYCO, Albania
38. Frank Morawietz, Managing Director of the Crossborder Factory, Germany
39. Gani Rashiti, Executive Director of the Center for Advocacy and Democracy Development (CADD), Serbia
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68. Ulrike Lunacek, Vice-President of the European Citizens Forum and the former European Parliament's Vice-President and Rapporteur for Kosovo, Austria
69. Valon Arifi, Human Rights Activist, Serbia
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