

# A Never-Ending Visa Liberalization Process for Kosovo: Between Commitments and Disillusionment

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# A NEVER-ENDING VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESS FOR KOSOVO: BETWEEN COMMITMENTS AND DISILLUSIONMENT

## Introduction

The EU's visa liberalization policy proved to be a successful foreign policy, by engendering key reforms in the recipient countries. And Brussels well understood the centrality of granting a visa-free regime to its neighbours, the Western Balkans, quite soon (2003). Five years later (2008), at the time Kosovo became independent, the visa liberalization process was officially launched for the entire region. Yet, it is in 2009 that the Council affirmed that Pristina would have benefited from a visa-free regime once key benchmarks would have been met. In 2012 the EU formally launched the visa liberalization dialogue with Kosovo. Six years later (2018) the European Commission (EC) gave the green light, by confirming that the country fulfilled all the criteria. At present, however, Kosovars are the only citizens in the region, who still need a visa to travel to the Schengen area. *Why, notwithstanding the delivered reforms, Kosovo is deprived of a visa-free regime? Besides that, why a country like Ukraine more than 40 times bigger than Kosovo, and with still unsolved corruption and organized-crime issues, benefit from the visa liberalization?* At the EU level the main opposition comes from France, the Netherlands and Belgium, because of unsolved corruption issues and possible migration flows once the visa regime will be uplifted. Yet, other countries like Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic, along with France, have become more and more frustrated with alleged abuses of visa-travel. Therefore, they might get stricter on granting a visa-free regime to Kosovo, while joining the established trio. Moreover, it is not to forget that the 5 non-recognizers oppose visa liberalization for Kosovo too. In short, the youngest Balkan state is surrounded by a circle of opponents, whose number is worryingly rising up. In the meantime, the European Parliament (EP), key European figures, as well as the Kosovar government got mobilized, by exercising pressure on the Council and the EU. However, a date for the process to be initiated is still unknown. Also, the frustration among the youngsters is increasing. Yet, reforms have been delivered and rewards must be granted too.

## I. A VISA LIBERALIZATION FOR KOSOVO: HOW EVERYTHING STARTED

The principles behind the visa liberalization reflect the values the European Union (EU) is based upon, namely openness, justice, and unity. In fact, the EU's visa liberalization policy, citizens of many non-EU countries can stay in the Schengen area for up to 90 days without a visa with, has been a successful foreign policy engendering many important reforms in the countries benefiting from it. And the EU should not lose its pace in granting such a policy to Kosovo too.

The EU's political commitment to liberalize the short-term visa-regime for the Western Balkans was announced on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2003, as part of the Thessaloniki agenda.<sup>1</sup> Four years later (2007), the Council, one of the 3 legislative bodies of the EU, invited for the first time the EC to consider possibilities to promote people-to-people contacts with the Western Balkans, while reaffirming its dedication to the Thessaloniki agenda above.<sup>2</sup> A year later (2008), the visa

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<sup>1</sup>The EU visa liberalization process in the Western Balkans: A comparative assessment, September 2013, Kosovar Center for Security Studies, Giz: 5 [online]. Available at: [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/The\\_EU\\_Visa\\_Liberalization\\_Process\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_Countries-A\\_Comparative\\_Assessment\\_363096.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/The_EU_Visa_Liberalization_Process_in_the_Western_Balkans_Countries-A_Comparative_Assessment_363096.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>2</sup>Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Western Balkans 2840<sup>th</sup> External Relations Council meeting Brussels, 10 December 2007: 2 [online]. Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo>

liberalization process was officially launched for the entire region. At that time Kosovo did not declare its independence yet. Therefore, it was not invited to take part in the process.<sup>3</sup>In the meantime, this would have relied on the definition of detailed roadmaps setting clear benchmarks to be met by all countries of the region for gradually advancing towards visa liberalization.<sup>4</sup>

Whether not immediately as for the other countries in the region, the Council affirmed on the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 that Kosovo should benefit from the perspective of a visa liberalization, once all the conditions are met. Also, it invited the Commission to move forward with a structured approach to bringing the people of Kosovo closer to the EU.<sup>5</sup>Consequently, one year later (2009) the EC proposed, in its October Communication, to move forward with the structured approach above through a visa dialogue with the perspective of eventual liberalization pursuant to the necessary reforms such as in the field of readmission arrangements, need of strengthening its administrative capacity to process readmission requests and implement an effective reintegration strategy. Also, it needed to enhance the security of its borders and guarantee the management of civil registries and the issuance of documents.<sup>6</sup>

One year later (2010), the Council took note of the Commission's intention to launch a visa liberalization dialogue once the necessary requirements have been fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> Later on (2011) the Council welcomed the Commission's proposal to launch a visa dialogue with Kosovo, considering the country's progress on readmission and reintegration, without prejudice to the Member States (MS)' position on status, if all conditions are effectively fulfilled.<sup>8</sup> In January 2012 the EU launched officially the visa liberalization dialogue with Kosovo with the aim of lifting visa obligations for its citizens. Yet, such a scenario would have materialized provided that the government of Kosovo would have implemented key reforms in core areas such as the security of travel documents, border, migration and asylum management, public order, and security disputes (fight against corruption and organized crime) and fundamental rights' issues related to

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[/documents/eu\\_kosovo/western\\_balkans\\_10\\_dec\\_en.pdf](#) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>3</sup>Visa Liberalization Process in Kosovo: A prologue to achievements, challenges and needs, Policy Note, Number 03-Juen 2012, Group for Legal and Political Studies: 4 [online]. Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163147/Policy%20Note%2003%202012%20eng.pdf> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>4</sup>Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Western Balkans 2846<sup>th</sup> External Relations Council meeting, Brussels, 28 January 2008: 1 [online]. Available at: [http://www.eu2008.si/en/News\\_and\\_Documents/Council\\_Conclusions/January/0128GAERC5.pdf](http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Council_Conclusions/January/0128GAERC5.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>5</sup>Council of the European Union. Council conclusions on enlargement/stabilization and association process 2984<sup>th</sup> General Affairs Council meeting Brussels, 7 and 8 December 2009: 6 [online]. Available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/111830.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/111830.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>6</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Kosovo\* - Fulfilling its European Perspective, Brussels, 14 October 2009:5-6 [online]. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/11535aca-2ac9-46a1-bbaf-965645ef19f6/language-en> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>7</sup>Council of the European Union. Council conclusions on enlargement/stabilization and association process 3060<sup>th</sup> General Affairs Council meeting Brussels, 14 December 2010: 6 [online]. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu\\_kosovo/118487\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu_kosovo/118487_en.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>8</sup>Visa liberalization with Kosovo. Roadmap: 2, [online]. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu\\_travel/visa\\_liberalisation\\_with\\_kosovo\\_road\\_map.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu_travel/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_road_map.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

the freedom of movement.<sup>9</sup> Three years later (2015) the EC adopted the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final report on Kosovo's progress<sup>10</sup> in fulfilling the requirements of its visa liberalization roadmap. At that time 8 benchmarks only remained. As soon as these would have been fulfilled, and provided that effective measures remained in place to prevent new migratory flows to the EU, the Commission would have proposed lifting the visa obligations for Kosovar citizens.<sup>11</sup> On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2018 the EC confirmed that Kosovo has fulfilled all the requirements for a visa-free regime. Particularly, the country met the 2 outstanding and remaining ones: the ratification of the border demarcation with Montenegro and a strong track record in the fight against crime and corruption, by thus meeting all benchmarks as these are set out in the visa liberalization roadmap.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the legal accomplishments above, at present Kosovo citizens still need a visa to travel to the Schengen area.

## II. A UNIQUE PATH TOWARDS VISA LIBERALIZATION: REFORMS DELIVERED

Undoubtedly, the path towards visa liberalization for Kosovo was, from the very start, a bit peculiar than that for its neighbours from a procedural point of view.

In the meantime, the EU approach towards liberalizing the visa regime for short-term stays in the EU and Schengen countries follows the same pattern as it had been the case of all the other Western Balkan countries before. Also, most of the criteria and reforms which need to be implemented in this process are part of the Justice and Home Affairs *acquis* (negotiation chapters 23 and 24) dealing with rule of law issues. Besides that, the visa liberalization process to Kosovo introduced more political conditionality, by clearly outlining the need of addressing bilateral issues and emphasizing the requirement of definitive and binding solutions.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, the fact that Kosovo's path towards getting visa liberalization was unique, was evident from the very beginning as briefly aforementioned. To start with, one peculiarity in comparison with the other countries in the Western Balkans is that Kosovo needed to sign a readmission agreement with the EU prior to starting the visa dialogue. However, because of the specific situation over its status, with 5 EUMS not recognizing it, Pristina was unable to sign a readmission agreement with the EU. Therefore, it needed to redirect its efforts towards signing on a bilateral basis with individual or group of countries from the EU. Otherwise said, even before starting the dialogue with Brussels, Kosovo had to find a way to circumvent its status issue.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>European Commission. Commission launches dialogue with Kosovo on visa-free travel, Press release, 19 January 2012 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_12\\_32](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_12_32) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>10</sup>The Commission adopted two reports on Kosovo's progress Kosovo on the visa dialogue. The first on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2013, and the second on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2014. See European Commission. First Commission report on progress by Kosovo\* towards visa liberalization, 12 February 2013 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_13\\_108](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_108) [Accessed: 10 November 2021]. See also, European Commission. Commission assesses progress by Kosovo in visa dialogue, 24 July 2014 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_14\\_871](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_871) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>11</sup>European Commission. Commission adopts final visa liberalization report for Kosovo, 18 December 2015 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_15\\_6369](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_6369) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>12</sup>European Union Office in Kosovo. Visa liberalization: Commission confirms Kosovo fulfils all required benchmarks, 18 July 2018 [online]. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo\\_en/48592/Visa%20Liberalisation:%20Commission%20confirms%20Kosovo%20fulfils%20all%20required%20benchmarks](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo_en/48592/Visa%20Liberalisation:%20Commission%20confirms%20Kosovo%20fulfils%20all%20required%20benchmarks) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>13</sup>Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski. EU conditionality in the visa liberalization process with Kosovo: increased specificity, meticulous scrutiny, in *Local Determinants of Kosovo's Statehood*, Kosovo Foundation for Open Society, Pristina, 2019: 307.

<sup>14</sup>Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski. EU Conditionality in the visa liberalization process with Kosovo: increased specificity, meticulous scrutiny, *ibid.*: 308.

Another distinctiveness, in comparison with its neighbours, is that Kosovo was imposed country-specific criteria. For instance, the need to enforce its efforts in the area of reintegration as well as border security, management of civil registries and issuance of documents. Concretely, this measure was adopted to effectively fight illegal migration and to reintegrate Kosovo citizens once readmitted in the country.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the two oddities above, the interest of the EU to push the process forward was stronger than the singularities. Yet, this common concern stalled on countries' specific interests and fears, by showing the inability of the EU to stand by its promises and speaking with one voice. Also, it clearly outlined that merit-based reforms are not always rewarded as they should be. Rather, politicization has been gaining more and more leverage in this regard, by opening up to a vicious circle. And the EU must find a way out for regaining its own credibility.

In the framework of the visa dialogue, Kosovo was requested first to adopt or amend the legislation set out in a roadmap in line with the EU *acquis*. This document contains a list of reforms Kosovo should embrace and implement so that the visa obligation might be uplifted. Consequently, it was asked to fully apply this legislation and all other measures there specified. Concretely, the visa liberalization dialogue would have addressed four sets of issues: document security; border/boundary and migration management, public order and security; and fundamental rights related to the freedom of movement. Also, the process, as part of the EU's overall policy towards the Western Balkans, was to take place within the framework of the Stabilization and Association Process Dialogue (SAP). And the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) in line with its mandate, would have played an important role in monitoring, mentoring, and advising the Kosovo institutions on adopting and implementing the reforms and fulfilling the requirements as set out in the roadmap. Once all the latter would have been met, the Commission would have presented a proposal to the European Parliament (EP) and the Council to lift the visa obligation.<sup>16</sup> Kosovo's visa roadmap, similar to the other roadmaps, was tailor-made and country specific. Yet, the number of benchmarks was almost double than for the other countries in the region. But the required reforms are content-wise largely the same.<sup>17</sup> And Kosovo has shown to deliver on them. Yet, some EU MS keep blocking the process to move on.

### **III. Netherlands, France, and Belgium keep obstructing for a Visa-Free Regime: Other Countries joined the Trio. A Dangerous Domino Effect**

Since the EC officially declared that Kosovo has fulfilled all benchmarks for a visa-free regime, there has been no progress in this regard. At the same time the Council expressed its willingness (May 2020) to begin negotiations with the Eastern Partnership countries which do not have a visa liberalization agreement, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. The document recognizes the possibility to launch new visa liberalization dialogues with the 3 countries above, provided that well-managed and secure mobility conditions are in place, including through the

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<sup>15</sup>Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski. EU Conditionality in the visa liberalization process with Kosovo: increased specificity, meticulous scrutiny, *ibid.*: 308-309.

<sup>16</sup>Visa liberalization with Kosovo\*. Roadmap: 2,3 &5-15. [online]. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu\\_travel/visa\\_liberalisation\\_with\\_kosovo\\_roadmap.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/eu_travel/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_roadmap.pdf) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>17</sup>Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski. EU Conditionality in the visa liberalization process with Kosovo: increased specificity, meticulous scrutiny, *op. cit.*: 309.

satisfactory implementation of the facilitation and readmission agreements.<sup>18</sup>This is a sign that Brussels is aware of the positive impact that such a process may endanger, while at the same time being cautious before undertaking a final decision thereupon.

In the meanwhile, Kosovars are the only citizens in the Western Balkans in need of a visa to travel to the Schengen area.<sup>19</sup>Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were granted visa-free status in December 2009,<sup>20</sup> and Albania and Bosnia a year later (2010).<sup>21</sup>

At present Kosovar citizens can visit 16 countries visa-free, including North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Turkey. Yet, many of them want to get to Europe.<sup>22</sup>

*Both the Netherlands and France oppose the visa liberalization for Kosovar citizens, by raising the issue of corruption at the institutional level, as well as a possible wave of migration from the country once visa liberalization takes place.<sup>23</sup> Particularly for France the continuation of reforms is necessary to get tangible effects on the rule of law and fight against organized crime.<sup>24</sup> Along with the Netherlands and France, Belgium opposes the visa liberalization as well, by signaling that the country should engage more in the fight against corruption and organized crime.<sup>25</sup>*

However, the risk that other countries could join the trio, by creating a sort of a domino effect as a reflection of more pregnant internal issues (i.e., immigration) to be solved, rather than being complacent towards a visa-free regime for Kosovars is not to be underestimated. In fact, alleged abuses (i.e., unlawful residency and unfounded asylum claims) by some Western Balkan states, as well as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, have prompted some European Union members to raise the possibility of canceling the visa-free travel regime to the bloc, according to an internal EU document. Specifically, along with France above, Germany and Italy have recently become more and more frustrated with alleged abuses of visa-free travel. And the Czech Republic joined the group.<sup>26</sup> Also, following the 2014 refugee crisis in Europe, when Kosovars were the main

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<sup>18</sup>Visa liberalization with the EU: Dream or Reality?, 18 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/visa-liberalization-with-the-eu-dream-or-reality> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>19</sup>The Schengen zone includes 26 countries which have signed the Schengen agreement. See Schengenvisa.info [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>20</sup>European Commission. Visa free travel for citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia before Christmas (IP/09/1852), 30 November 2009 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_09\\_1852](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_09_1852) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>21</sup>European Commission. Visa free regime for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina: the European Commission welcomes the Council's decision (MEMO/10/548), 8 November 2010 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_10\\_548](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_10_548) [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>22</sup>Kosovan passport visa free countries to travel, 11 September 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://visalist.io/kosovo/visa-free> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>23</sup>PM Kurti asks EU to abolish visas for Kosovo citizens calling the delay a great injustice, schengenvisa.info/news, 6 October 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/pm-kurti-asks-eu-to-abolish-visas-for-kosovo-citizens-calling-the-delay-a-great-injustice/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021]. See also, France extinguishes Kosovo hopes for visa liberalization in the near future, schengenvisa.info/news, 15 October 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/france-extinguishes-kosovo-hopes-for-visa-liberalization-in-the-near-future/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>24</sup>France won't support visa liberalization for Kosovo, 17 May 2019 [online]. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a484553-france-disaggres-with-visa-free-regime-for-kosovo/> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>25</sup>Why the Netherlands says Kosovo is not ready for visa liberalization? Tiranapost, 4 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://tiranapost.net/kosova/pse-holanda-thote-se-kosova-nuk-eshte-gati-per-liberalizimin-e-vizave-i498836/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>26</sup>EU Countries Mull Curbing Visa-Free Travel For Balkan, Eastern European States Due to "Abuses", RadioFreeEurope, 29 September 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-visa-free-travel-abuse/31483633.html> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].



asylum seekers from countries listed as safe, the EU fears that a possible influx of asylum-seekers or illegal migrants from Kosovo may take place again.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime, Croatia believes that Kosovo has fulfilled all conditions for visa liberalization. Yet, now the country must give arguments that the work required for such a process has been done, so as to convince the reluctant countries. Also, it must keep fighting corruption and organized crime.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. PROMISE UNFULFILLED: THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT GETS MOBILIZED

The situation of impasse in the Council pushed the EP, and other key European figures to get mobilized, and push the process forward. To start with, one year and two months (2019) after the EC's green light for a visa liberalization for Kosovo, the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) voted to start talks with the European Council, whose approval is the last major step for Kosovo citizens to start traveling visa-free to the Schengen Area.<sup>29</sup> A year later (2020), because of no advancements, 42 members of the EP signed letters to the French President Emmanuel Macron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte urging them to support Kosovo's visa liberalization by the end of the year.<sup>30</sup> Also, the German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger called on the EU officials to resolve the issue of visa liberalization for Kosovo as soon as possible. He expressly said that this is an unfulfilled promise of the EU and the postponement of resolving the problem calls into question its own credibility.<sup>31</sup> Even the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, clearly stated that Kosovo's visa liberalization is long overdue with the country meeting all the criteria.<sup>32</sup>

By postponing the issue, Brussels is clearly showing to stand by double standards. Just as an example Ukraine (a country of 43,381,166 Mln people<sup>33</sup>), with still ongoing corruption and organized crime issues, has been granted visa liberalization on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2017.<sup>34</sup> Thus, *why a country of solely 1.78 Mln people<sup>35</sup>, with half of the population being*

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<sup>27</sup>EU Parliament confirms its support for Kosovo Visa Liberalization for the third time in a year, 25 September 2019 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-parliament-confirms-its-support-for-kosovo-visa-liberalization-for-the-third-time-in-a-year/> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>28</sup>Croatia to help Kosovo Convince EU Reluctant States on Visa Liberalization, 4 February 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/croatia-to-help-kosovo-convince-eu-reluctant-states-on-visa-liberalization/> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>29</sup>EU Parliament confirms its support for Kosovo Visa Liberalization for the third time in a year, 25 September 2019 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-parliament-confirms-its-support-for-kosovo-visa-liberalization-for-the-third-time-in-a-year/> [Accessed: 10 November 2021].

<sup>30</sup>Kosovo visa liberalization: 42 MEPs send letters to Macron and Rutte, ask for a positive decision, 9 July 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/09/kosovo-visa-liberalisation-42-meps-send-letters-to-macron-and-rutte-ask-for-a-positive-decision/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>31</sup>Resolve the issue of visas for Kosovo, tell that to Macron, Kosovo online, 20 July 2020 [online]. Available at: [https://xs4.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=07&dd=20&nav\\_id=108957](https://xs4.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=07&dd=20&nav_id=108957) [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>32</sup>Borell: Kosovo has met all criteria for visa liberalization, European Western Balkans, 24 May 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/05/24/borell-kosovo-has-met-all-criteria-for-visa-liberalization/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>33</sup>Ukraine population [online]. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/ukraine-population/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>34</sup>European Commission. European Commission welcomes the Council adoption of visa liberalization for the citizens of Ukraine, 11 November 2017 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_17\\_1270](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_17_1270) [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>35</sup>Kosovo in figures 2019. Kosovo Agency of Statistics [online]. Available at: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5821/kosovo-in-figures-2019.pdf> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

youngsters, and despite the requirements met, is kept on hold? Reality on the ground shows that the visa liberalization process is getting politicized, while relying on business interests too.

France's appeal towards Kosovo is very low at present. Yet, Paris was the first to recognize the country's independence in 2008. But things have significantly changed over time with Macron clearly showing strong commitments with Serbia. The French President visited the country in 2019, when multiple bilateral agreements were signed, including for investment in Belgrade airport, for the construction of the Belgrade subway, and an agreement between defence ministers for the purchase of French Mistral 3 short-range air defense systems.<sup>36</sup>

Also, the recent rapprochement between Serbia and the Netherlands leaves room for doubting that any possible visa liberalization for Kosovo will come any time soon. In fact, Belgrade is seeking to further strengthen its relations with Amsterdam. Also, the Serbian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nikola Selakovic, reminded about his official visit to the country at the end of November, by recalling that the last one of a Serbian minister was 14 years ago. At the same time, Selakovic pointed out his country's commitment to improving economic cooperation with the Netherlands, increasing trade, but also further attracting Dutch investments.<sup>37</sup>

Serbia's reinvigorated activism across the EU is ongoing. Before meeting his Dutch counterpart, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic had a *rendez-vous* with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of Belgium Sophie Wilmes. The date came not by chance, considering that it marked 135 years of mutual diplomatic relations. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two ministries was also signed.<sup>38</sup>

Along with the newcomers, the 5 non-recognizers (i.e., Greece, Romania, Cyprus, Spain, and Slovakia) oppose visa liberalization for Kosovo too.<sup>39</sup> Thus, even if the criteria for a visa-free regime have been met, Kosovo is *de facto* surrounded by a ring of opponents rendering the start of the process implausible at least for the moment. For how long? No date has been settled yet.

## V. BLOCKING THE VISA-FREE REGIME IS UNFAIR AND SHORT-SIGHTED

Yet, the Kosovo's government attempts at seeking a *rapprochement* and support on the visa liberalization issue is still ongoing, and it is a sign of the country not giving up on what its own and merit-based right is. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2021, Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani met the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, by thanking him for his country's support to Kosovo's state-building, while also reiterating the request on the Netherlands about backing visa liberalization for Kosovar citizens.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>How Macron can strengthen the EU in the Western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 February 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-macron-can-strengthen-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>37</sup>Serbia is determined to further strengthen bilateral relations with the Netherlands, Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 November 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/serbia-determined-further-strengthen-bilateral-relations-netherlands> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>38</sup>Developing relations of Serbia, Belgium in all areas, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Brussels, 16 September 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/178378/developing-relations-of-serbia-belgium-in-all-areas.php> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>39</sup>Visa liberalization for Kosovo under negotiation in future, 9 December 2019 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengen-visa.com/news/visa-liberalization-for-kosovo-under-negotiation-in-future/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>40</sup>Osmani meets with the Dutch Prime Minister, asks for visa liberalization for Kosovo, Daily News, 25 September 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.txtreport.com/news/2021-09-25-osmani-meets-with-the-dutch-prime-minister--asks-for-visa-liberalization-for-kosovo.HywhDdhQt.html> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

At the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the EU-Kosovo Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee, held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, told the Assembly that his country is committed to intensifying the fulfillment of reforms and integration criteria. He well reminded that his country is on the right track, by acknowledging that change across Kosovo has brought stability and economic development. He recalled that the criteria for progress and advancement towards the EU should be fair and merit-based, by resulting in the fulfillment of obligations by the EU. He explicitly said that the EU starts at home, and it should grow from within. But it should help in this regard. Yet, he called unfair and short-sighted the blocking of visa liberalization for Kosovo by the Council of the European Union.<sup>41</sup>

Also, the Speaker of the Assembly, Glauk Konjufca, intervening at the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting above, said that the non-liberalization of visas for Kosovo's citizens is leaving a bad taste in the country, with some EU MS blocking, while creating the impression that the EU is not a family of values, but a group of individuals without a common platform.<sup>42</sup>

The German MEP, Romeo Franz, in a joint-conference with MP Mimoza Kusari-Lila, both co-chairs of the Parliamentary Commission for Stabilization and Association between the European Union and Kosovo, also said that the EU should keep its promise. He recalled that the EP is Kosovo's strongest ally, which is constantly working to persuade reluctant states to change their minds, and it is a matter of time. At the same time, he reminded that the EU's credibility is at its lowest point. His co-chair, Mimoza Kusari-Lila expressly regretted that the citizens of the Republic of Kosovo still bear the consequences and the heaviest burden for not liberalizing visas.<sup>43</sup>

*One month before Kurti intervened on the issue, by calling on the EU to remove the requirement to obtain a visa before travelling to the Schengen area for his citizens, remaining the only country in the Balkans not having finalized a visa liberalization agreement with the EU.<sup>44</sup>*

*At the European Union-Western Balkans summit in Brdo (6 October 2021) the Kosovar prime minister reminded that more than 3 years have passed since the EC recommended the visa liberalization for Kosovo for the second time. Therefore, he called on skeptical EU leaders to recognize the progress achieved and lift visa regime for his citizens.<sup>45</sup>*

Back in summer 2021, the EU's special representative for Kosovo, Tomas Szunyong, mentioned that the situation surrounding the visa liberalization process was not positive. Yet, the decision rests with the European Council, made up of the foreign ministers of each of the 27 EU MS, but with no consensus on removing visa requirements for Kosovo's citizens. Also, the EU ambassador

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<sup>41</sup>Prime Minister Kurti: Blocking the opening of visa liberalization negotiations, unfair and short-sighted, Office of the Prime Minister, 4 November 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/prime-minister-kurti-blocking-the-opening-of-visa-liberalization-negotiations-unfair-and-short-sighted/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>42</sup>Konjufca: Kosovo does not blackmail or beg the EU, 4 November 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://en.rtv21.tv/konjufca-kosova-does-not-blackmail-or-beg-us/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>43</sup>EU must keep its promise on visa liberalization, Kosovo citizens are bearing the consequences through no fault of their own, 5 November 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.txtreport.com/news/2021-11-05-eu-must-keep-its-promise-on-visa-liberalization--kosovo-citizens-are-bearing-the-consequences-through-no-fault-of-their-own.r15SAozPK.html>

<sup>44</sup>PM Kurti asks EU to abolish visas for Kosovo citizens calling the delay a great injustice, schengenvisainfonews, 6 October 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/pm-kurti-asks-eu-to-abolish-visas-for-kosovo-citizens-calling-the-delay-a-great-injustice/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>45</sup>At the summit in Slovenia, Prime minister Kurti called on skeptical EU leaders to recognize progress achieved in Kosovo and lift visa regime, The Prime Minister Office, 6 October 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/at-the-summit-in-slovenia-prime-minister-kurti-called-on-sceptical-eu-leaders-to-recognise-progress-achieved-in-kosovo-and-lift-visa-regime/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

refused to predict when the visa liberalization would be granted. At the same time, he reminded that a positive decision will be more likely if Kosovo undertakes its efforts.<sup>46</sup>

Some weeks after the adoption of the 2019-2020 Commission Report for Kosovo, among various issues, the rapporteur to Kosovo MEP Viola Von Cramon said that the EU remains unable to deliver on its promise on providing visa-free travel to Kosovo's citizens, even though both the Commission and the Parliament itself reiterated their support numerous times ever since July 2018.<sup>47</sup>

Back in March 2021 the EP, the institution pushing significantly the visa liberalization process forward, called on the Council to urgently proceed with the adoption of a visa-free regime for Kosovo's citizens.<sup>48</sup> Also, it reminded that the country continues to fulfill all the benchmarks of the visa liberalization roadmap, as consistently confirmed by the Commission since July 2018.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, it clarified that the visa liberalization will improve stability and brings Kosovo closer to the EU by facilitating travel and business.<sup>50</sup>

Twenty days later the EP pressured the Council once again, by reminding that the isolation of Kosovo's citizens is having an impact on the implementation of the EU's programmes, weakening the EU's credibility, and with a possible impact on the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue.<sup>51</sup>

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2021 the EP released its report on Kosovo, by reiterating its support for visa liberalization, while being aware that it is not only about Kosovo's obligations. Rather the EU should fulfill its promises as well.<sup>52</sup> Despite a continuous pressure from the Kosovar government, and uninterrupted engagement by the EP, a clear date for the process to step up remains unknown, by widening considerably the disillusionment about the EU above all among the youngsters.

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<sup>46</sup>Kosovo must be patient over visas-EU representative says, BalkanInsight, 4 August 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/04/kosovo-must-be-patient-over-visas-eu-representative-says/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>47</sup>Visa liberalization for Kosovo: From one report to another, European Western Balkans, 29 April 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/04/29/visa-liberalization-for-kosovo-from-one-report-to-another/> [Accessed: 9 November 2021].

<sup>48</sup>Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Kosovo (2019/2172 (INI)), 3 March 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031_EN.html) [Accessed: 23 September 2021].

<sup>49</sup>Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Kosovo (2019/2172 (INI)), 3 March 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031_EN.html) [Accessed: 23 September 2021].

<sup>50</sup>Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Kosovo (2019/2172 (INI)), 3 March 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0031_EN.html) [Accessed: 23 September 2021].

<sup>51</sup>European Parliament. European Parliament resolution of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Kosovo (2019/2172(INI)), [online]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0113\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0113_EN.html) [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

<sup>52</sup>Aleksandar Ivković. Von Cramon: Visa liberalization very damaging to EU reputation in Kosovo, EU supports it, European Western Balkans, 26 March 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/26/ewb-interview-von-cramon-visa-liberalisation-very-damaging-to-eu-reputation-in-kosovo-ep-supports-it/> [Accessed: 11 November 2021].

## VI. VOICES AMONG THE YOUTH: BETWEEN FRUSTRATION AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Youngsters in Kosovo are disillusioned about the stagnation of the visa liberalization.<sup>53</sup> On how far the visa-regime conditions their daily life, they provided the following answers on a scale from 1 to 7.<sup>54</sup>

**Table 1 – The visa regime conditions my daily life**

Nr. interviewees	Scale 1 to 7
1	2
2	4
4	5
6	6
10	7

Source: table is by the author.

Among the *main shortcomings* from not benefiting from a visa-free regime the youngsters reported the 4 key following ones: limitation to the free movement, feeling discriminated, hindering the development of youth and open-mindedness/knowing other cultures, and limitation to the academic career, work opportunities, visiting family members abroad.

On whether the application for a visa has been carried out, and how many times, the results have been as follows:

**Table 2 – Number of times applied for a visa**

Tot. nr.interviewees	Nr. times
5	1
1	2
4	3
1	5
2	7
1	20 (+)

Source: the table is by the author.

When asked about the experience they had with the overall procedure, the following assessment on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 is not at all negative and 6 extremely negative, has been given:

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<sup>53</sup>A total of 23 youngsters, aged 17-31, males (tot. 11) and females (tot. 12), have been interviewed in Pristina between the 29.09.2021 and the 12.10.2021.

<sup>54</sup>1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=slightly disagree; 4=neither agree nor disagree; 5= slightly agree; 6=agree; and 7=strongly agree.

**Table 3 – Experience had with the overall procedure**

Tot. interviewees	scale
3	1
1	2
4	4
1	5
4	6
3	3

*Source: the table is by the author.*

A total of 9 youngsters said they never applied for a visa, and among the main reasons they listed the following: complicated procedure, too many documents required, too time-consuming and gambling.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Kosovars are the only citizens across the Western Balkans, who need a visa to travel to the Schengen zone. Despite accomplished reforms, and notwithstanding the EC's green light, Pristina has still not been granted a visa-free regime. Conversely, the EU has shown to be unfaithful to its own promises, while pursuing double standards instead of abiding by its common values. Its stand, however, towards Kosovo undermines its own credibility. Also, the way the visa liberalization process has been dealt with in the youngest Balkan state has clearly displayed that politicization and countries' specific interests precede delivered reforms. Otherwise said, a merit-based process turned to be an *ad hoc*-based one. Yet, the time for waiting further is over.

- The **EU should stop pursuing double standards** in the visa liberalization process and **it should grant a visa free-regime to Kosovo by mid-2022 latest**. The process is of utmost importance for boosting economic partnerships, promoting cross-cultural contact, improving professional and educational exchange;
- **Kosovo should keep exercising its pressure on the Council about its right for a visa-free regime**. Likewise, the other **EU MS should do the same towards their most reluctant partners**.

### **Policy Notes**

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