



## Bulgaria and Romania ready to join Schengen, says Civil Liberties Committee

Committees: Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

**Bulgaria and Romania's bid to join the Schengen border-free area won the Civil Liberties Committee's green light on Monday. They have met the necessary conditions, based on the evaluation reports on their preparations, say MEPs. However, Parliament must be kept informed of additional measures to be taken in the Bulgaria-Turkey-Greece area to cope with a possible surge in migration pressure, they add. Parliament takes its plenary vote in June, and the final decision will be for the Council.**

Under current EU rules, the key condition for joining the Schengen area is the ability to ensure the security of EU's external borders.

Checking that new members have met all Schengen acquis requirements (control of land, sea and air borders, issuing visas, police co-operation, readiness to connect to and use the Schengen Information System and data protection), is a precondition for the Council of Ministers to decide, after consulting the European Parliament, to abolish checks at internal borders with those Member States.

After considering evaluations of the two Member States' progress and the findings of follow-up visits by expert teams, the Civil Liberties Committee concluded that although some remaining issues will require regular reporting and further attention in the future, they do not constitute an obstacle to full Schengen membership for Bulgaria and Romania.

"Are these two countries ready to enter Schengen? My answer is clearly yes. And this is clear in all the evaluation reports and it is clear from the visit we carried out. In some areas these two countries are even better prepared than some countries who are already Schengen members", said Civil Liberties Committee rapporteur Carlos Coelho (EPP, PT).

"Some of these preparations result from the circumstance that investments have been carried out recently, they now have more updated, more modern, and more effective equipment in place. And it is also because of political investment: both of these countries have invested politically in order to prove that they complied with all the Schengen criteria", he added.

### **Bulgaria - Turkey - Greece border area**

However, Mr Coelho also stresses the need to acknowledge that illegal migration makes Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece one of the EU's most sensitive external border areas. This means Bulgaria must take some additional measures, including a special action plan to be implemented when it joins Schengen and working out a common approach with Greece and Turkey to coping with a possible surge in migration pressure.

The committee inserted an amendment asking that the Member States concerned inform the European Parliament and the Council, in writing in the course of a six-month period beginning on the date of entry into force of the integration decision, on any shortcomings and the implementation of these additional measures.

# Press release

“It is essential to bear in mind that the removal of controls at internal borders requires a high degree of mutual trust among Member States in the existence of effective controls on the external borders, because the security of the Schengen area depends on the rigour and efficiency with which each Member State carries out checks at its external borders”, says the rapporteur.

The committee believes that, before the end of 2011, the EU should set a date for applying the Schengen acquis to Bulgaria and Romania.

## Next steps

The opinion on the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen area should be put to a vote by Parliament as a whole at the 6-9 June plenary session, before the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 9-10 June, which is to discuss the issue.

The integration decision should be made by the Council, by unanimous decision of all governments of the states which already belong to the Schengen area.

The Hungarian Presidency of the Council of Ministers has stated that it will continue to work towards a solution acceptable to all parties concerned, taking into account the concerns voiced by some Member States.

## Background

Schengen co-operation began on 14 June 1985, with the Schengen Agreement, which provided for the abolition of systematic checks at the internal borders of the signatory states and for the creation of a common area, with free movement of persons, and a single external border (with common rules on external border controls, a common visa policy, police and judicial co-operation and the establishment of the Schengen Information System). The five founder members were Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

The Schengen area has since grown to encompass 25 members: the EU countries Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three associated non-EU countries Norway, Iceland and Switzerland (Liechtenstein should soon become the fourth associated country).

At present, free movement is guaranteed within a territory possessing 42,673 km of sea coasts and 7,721 km of land borders, covering 25 countries and 400 million citizens.

The committee vote was 33 in favour, and 3 against.

In the chair: Juan Fernando López Aguilar (S&D, ES)

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