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## **EU-CANADA SUMMIT HANGS IN DOUBT, CETA FATE UNCERTAIN**

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**EXCLUSIVE** / Bulgaria and Romania will find it very difficult to ratify the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the EU and Canada because of the refusal by Ottawa to lift the visa requirement for their nationals, and have proposed the accord be postponed.

Bulgaria has joined Romania, who first indicated that it would veto CETA – expressing disappointment that Ottawa had not delivered on its promise to solve the visa waiver issue – in an effort to put pressure both on Ottawa and the Commission and the EU member states.

CETA was agreed in 2014 and, according to Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, it is the best trade agreement the EU has been able to conclude so far. It is yet to be signed and ratified.

Canada has a visa-free regime with all EU countries except Romania and Bulgaria. The USA also has a visa requirement for the citizens of Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Croatia and Cyprus. The difference, however, is that the CETA agreement has already been concluded, while TTIP is under negotiation.

Ottawa has not delivered on its promise to solve the issue, contained in the statement of the 2014 EU-Canada summit.

In a joint letter seen by EurActiv.com, the ambassadors of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU, Dimitar Tzantchev and Luminita Odobescu, say their countries are disappointed by the way chosen by the Commission to proceed with the existing reciprocity mechanism in EU legislation in visa matters.

A regulation which entered into force on 20 December requires EU countries to react in common on visa matters, especially in cases where foreign countries subjects [EU] citizens to differing treatment.

However, the College of Commissioners met on 12 April and decided that the consequences of the EU imposing visas to Canada and the USA would be so dire, that the EU legislation requiring reciprocity was impossible to be applied. April 12th was the deadline for the Commission to propose how EU countries should react in common, as an EU regulation requires, in cases where foreign countries subjects [EU] citizens to differing treatment.

Instead of issuing a delegated act and introduce visas for Canadian nationals travelling to the EU, the Commission sent the issue to be debated in the Council and the European Parliament.

EurActiv learned that Bulgaria and Romania engaged in a huge lobbying effort to make their case with the Commission, with member states and with the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the EU. In parallel, intensive contacts took place with the Canadian authorities. But reportedly the result of these contacts has been a big disappointment for Sofia and Bucharest.

We are disappointed by the way chosen by the European Commission to proceed further with the reciprocity mechanism. We expect the Commission to implement the relevant provisions and regulations, thus safeguarding the Treaties and their fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination for all European citizens, the ambassadors write.

The diplomats explain that their countries have had many contacts with the Canadian authorities, without any hint of finding a solution to the problem. EurActiv has learned that the Canadian authorities appear to have made the solution more difficult, by linking it to issues such as how the countries guard their borders, what is the procedure for issuing passports or the situation of the minorities in the two countries.

It would be very difficult for the Governments of Bulgaria and Romania, under the current circumstances, to find arguments to promote the adoption of the Strategic Partnership Agreement between Canada and the EU and its member states (SPA), while Canada is still imposing a discriminating treatment to our citizens, based on unclear and changing criteria, the ambassadors further write.

The diplomats ask their colleagues from the remaining 26 member states to postpone the discussion on SPA for a while, because for us it is very difficult in this moment to move forward with the adoption of this agreement.

The intention of the Dutch Presidency is to send the CETA agreement to the Council before the end of June. After that it is likely that the process of ratification by member states will begin. However, this is not 100% certain, because there are still debates whether the agreement is between the member states and Canada, or between the EU and Canada.

A EU-Canada summit is due to take place on 27 October, but in the absence of an agreement on the visa issue, the summit hangs in doubt.

### **Signing in October?**

The issue was discussed today (13 May) at the Foreign Affairs Council, which has an agenda item on the review of the negotiations of TTIP and CETA, with a view on signing the agreement at the October summit.

Tzantchev spoke to a small group of journalists during the Council meeting. He said that he informed them of his country's position.

The Bulgarian position is clear. We consider that the Canadian side must make proof of strong political commitment to solve the issue of lifting the visa requirement, in very clear deadlines. I cannot see how the Bulgarian citizens and the Bulgarian business could take advantage of CETA if the visa requirement would stay, he said.

The process of ratification of CETA will not happen overnight, Tzantchev explained.

It could take a couple of years. In this framework, we must have a clear timetable when the visa requirement for Bulgarian and Romanian nationals will be lifted, he said.

Asked by EurActiv what was expected from the 27 October EU-Canada summit, and if there was a risk that the summit would be a failure, he said:

It is expected that the summit would issue a strong signal for launching the CETA process. There is the idea of early entry into force of the agreement, an issue to be debated in the next weeks and months. Right now I cannot say if the summit would be a failure, because everything will depend from the reaction of the Canadian side.

Tzantchev said Bulgaria has received strong support from Croatia during the discussions.

As EurActiv has previously reported, Bulgaria has linked the visa-waiver issue also in the context of the TTIP negotiations.

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Kaynak/Source: