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## **DUTCH VOTE TO REINTRODUCE VISAS ALARMS ALBANIA**

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The European Union ambassador in Tirana, Luigi Soreca, joined the Albanian Foreign Ministry and the Dutch embassy on Wednesday in calming down fears about a possible return to a visa regime for Albanians traveling to EU Schengen countries.

It comes after parliament in the Netherlands voted to deploy the so-called Emergency Break Mechanism for Albania due to concerns about rising criminal activity by Albanian nationals in the country.

Parliament asked the Dutch government to invoke the visa suspension mechanism, citing an increase in both criminality and illegal migration from Albania.

According to the Dutch embassy in Tirana, The [Dutch] government is currently considering the steps it will take.

The EU ambassador said nothing had happened yet. Nothing has changed for the moment, Soreca said on Wednesday.

He said the Albanian and Dutch governments should increase collaboration on irregular migration and organized crime.

The Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs said it hopes the Dutch resolution will not result in consequences, and said it considered the matter a question of domestic politics in The Netherlands.

The European Commission [is] the authority that will consider the request and will provide an answer to it, the ministry said in a press release.

The electoral climate in The Netherlands has certainly impacted on this, and even though we feel regret Albania being put on the competing parties agenda, we have no doubts about the fact that, beyond the horizon of the European elections, facts will prevail over electoral clichés, it added.

Looking at it objectively \* the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs is hopeful that the said resolution cannot be supported in the European Commission, given that none of the criteria required for the temporary suspension mechanism to be put in place applies to Albania, it added.

The parliamentary motion was filed last week by four Dutch parties, three ruling and one in opposition, and cited a significant increase in criminal activities by Albanian mafia groups in the Netherlands.

Dutch MPs argued that continued visa liberalization for Albania was contingent on several conditions, including a tough fight against international crime.

They suggested that an increase in organized crime by Albanians showed the Albanian government led by Edi Rama has failed to contain this problem.

Christian Democrat MP Madeleine Van Toorenburg, who worked for UNMIK in Kosovo, was quoted saying that there were six times more Albanians in the Netherlands than officially registered. She also quoted a police investigator from Rotterdam who had never seen such a violent group as the Albanian mafia.

Albanians have enjoyed visa-free travel to the EU passport-free Schengen area since 2010. But a sharp increase in asylum requests filled by Albanian citizens since 2015 mainly in Germany and France caused concerns in several EU countries.

Criminal activity by Albanian nationals in several EU countries is also a concern, with Albania drug smugglers present in both the soft and hard drugs market. Albania is considered a source of cannabis and a transit country for heroin and cocaine.

This is not the first time that Western European countries have debated visa liberalisation for Balkan countries. Similar debates led to a motion in the EU in February 2017.

The European Council then revised the suspension mechanism for visa liberalization agreements for the Western Balkans, and those amendments allows the European Commission or a simple majority of member states to suspend visa-free regime.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/17/albania-and-eu-delegation-downplays-dutch-vote-for-visa-reintroduction/>

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