

Canada-Europe trade deal risks derailment over visa spat

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OTTAWA— Canada's desire for a sweeping free trade pact with the European Union is unlikely to happen unless Ottawa drops its visa requirements for three European countries, the EU ambassador warns.

And even as Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird and International Trade Minister Ed Fast launch a national campaign to sell the merits of the deal to Canadians, European Union officials are warning significant hurdles lie ahead, notably tough negotiations on agriculture.

Both Canada and the European Union hope to sign the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) — billed as Ottawa's most ambitious trade agreement yet— sometime this year.

But passage of the deal requires not just the approval of the European Parliament but the individual EU member nations as well. And three of those countries — Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania — are unlikely to endorse the trade pact unless Canada lifts its visa requirement on their citizens, said Matthias Brinkmann, the EU's ambassador in Canada.

The 27-nation European Union doesn't require visa for Canadian visitors and wants reciprocal treatment, Brinkmann said Thursday, calling the visas an "irritant."

Canada slapped the visa requirement on the Czech Republic in particular in 2009 to stem an influx of Roma refugees.

Ottawa is hoping sweeping immigration reforms proposed earlier this year will discourage claimants and allow the visa restrictions to be lifted, eliminating the stumbling block on its free trade agenda.

Among the changes, refugees from countries deemed “safe” would be fast-tracked through the hearing process in a bid to speedily deport bogus claimants.

Negotiations on the trade deal are continuing though the trickiest issues have been left to the final stages and the “end game” may require “political oversight,” Brinkmann said.

That includes talks on agriculture, which EU officials conceded are “always the hardest to deal with.”

The Europeans said they are not interested in pressing Canada to abandon its supply management over things like dairy products. But they want greater access to the Canadian market by boosting a quota that hasn’t changed in years.

And the quid pro quo would be greater access for beef and pork producers to the European market.

“There will be no beef without dairy,” Brinkmann pointedly said.

However some EU officials said the trade-offs could come in other areas as well, such as intellectual property or public procurement.

“I think what we are looking for in the end is an overall balance,” one official said.

On Friday, cabinet ministers will be speaking across the

country to boost the benefits of the trade deal to “workers and businesses in every region of the country,” according to a news release.

Baird and Fast will speak in Ottawa while other ministers will fan out to the other provinces to give their sales pitch.

The Harper government says free trade with the EU would add \$12 billion a year to Canadian economic activity and boost two-way trade by 20 per cent.