

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Coming Home”

Figures released by the Foreign Ministry this week show that 1,343,805 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are currently living abroad. More than 800,000 live in other parts of Europe, and nearly half a million are resident in the United States and Canada.

This vast Diaspora was created in appalling circumstances, and continues to represent a wound in the collective memory of this country and its citizens. When old school-mates arrange reunions here they often do so around the return of this or that friend who is visiting from Stockholm or Sydney or St Louis, and the conversation quickly turns to former pupils now scattered across the globe.

The extent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Diaspora – perhaps as much as a quarter of the pre-war population – rightly places the issue at the centre of national debate.

For a decade after the war, through the systematic and sustained effort of international agencies led by the UNHCR and then by the OHR-coordinated Refugee and Return Task Force, and finally under the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugee Return of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this country witnessed the most successful refugee repatriation exercise in history. More than one million people exercised their right to return to their pre-war homes.

Yet, as the Foreign Ministry's figures reveal, close to one and a half million continue to live abroad.

Some have built new lives in their country of refuge and no longer wish to come home. That is their right. Others would return, but they face daunting challenges. For one thing, they must reintegrate in a social-services system that is haphazard and inefficient.

In its April newsletter, the World Bank notes that public spending on health services in Bosnia and Herzegovina is 7.4 per cent of GDP and higher than the average for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – yet services are poorer. One reason is that salaries account for half of health-care spending, leaving insufficient funds for investing in new facilities and equipment.

Another major challenge facing potential returnees is the antiquated business environment, which is directly responsible for the small number of new jobs and investment opportunities being created.

Despite these difficulties, many members of the Diaspora still wish to come home. At the same time, many of these social, economic and administrative problems can be addressed – effectively and quickly – if the new authorities put their minds to it.

When members of the Diaspora do come home they bring enormous benefits to this country – including skills, capital and knowledge of overseas markets and business opportunities. This is a national asset. Bosnia and Herzegovina should be making the most of it.

Recently, I was introduced to the work of a new non-governmental organisation, the Domestic Product Promotion Alliance, which, among other things, aims to channel Diaspora investment potential into production in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The object is not domestic-market protection but rather to help this country's companies compete more successfully in the open global market. The group will attempt to establish networks connecting Bosnia and Herzegovina's businesspeople with their counterparts in the Diaspora.

This and similar initiatives can help to unleash the enormous potential for economic regeneration which the Diaspora represents. As ever, citizens can make a good deal of progress on their own. But they need help – not

hindrance – from their political authorities, parliamentary representatives and governments.

Among other things, the issue of dual citizenship should be resolved. This would help maintain an enduring relationship between the Diaspora and their homeland in the interest of both and help encourage today's trickle of Diaspora investment to grow into a flood.

Current legislation requires citizens holding dual citizenship to choose one citizenship and renounce the other, if no bilateral agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the concerned state is concluded by 1 January 2013. But many countries where a significant number of Bosnia and Herzegovina 's citizens live do not sign such bilateral agreements. Most countries allow citizens to enjoy dual citizenship where they qualify, without restricting this right to those cases where a bilateral agreement has been concluded with another country. Bosnia and Herzegovina should do the same.

It isn't a question of waiting until 2013 to revisit this issue. As long as the status of citizenship is unclear, tens of thousands of people in the Diaspora will think twice about coming home. That would be a tremendous and unnecessary loss for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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