

BiH Needs Concrete Proposals for Visa-Free Future

Real progress can be made in relaxing visa requirements for BiH citizens if politicians translate election promises into practical measures, the High Representative and EU Special Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, said today.

He said preparations to introduce visa facilitation could begin next year, with full visa liberalisation following after that if BiH makes implements necessary reforms. Visa facilitation means simplifying visa-issuance procedures for certain categories of traveller, simplifying the documentary evidence that has to be submitted with visa applications, increasing the issuance of multiple-entry visas, issuing visas with longer validity, waiving or reducing handling fees for certain categories of traveller, and reducing the time it takes to process applications.

Mr Schwarz-Schilling, who has been lobbying for visa facilitation since even before he became HR/EUSR, noted that in his discussions with Franco Frattini, the European Commission Vice President and Commissioner responsible for justice, freedom and security, Mr Frattini has indicated a willingness to move forward on the visa issue.

“However, obstacles remain that must be overcome for visa-free travel to become a reality and they must be overcome by those candidates standing for election on 1 October,” the HR/EUSR told participants at a roundtable on visa issues organised in Sarajevo today by the Centre for Civic Initiatives and the East-West Parliamentary Practice Project.

The HR/EUSR stressed that progress on visas cannot be made unless BiH’s overarching reform agenda is completed. “Let me be clear. Unless we have police reform and unless we ensure

cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, citizens of this country will continue to wait in line for visas. Voters should understand that any candidate who claims to be *for* visa-free travel but has opposed these measures is trying to square a circle.”

The HR/EUSR laid out specific steps that must be taken by the BiH Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Security, including the integration of information and document management across different levels of government, the initiation of a process to introduce new biometric passports, the setting up of a centralised system for the registration of residency permits, and the upgrading of security controls at BiH borders.

“Today, every candidate running for election is a vocal advocate of visa-free travel for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina ,” the HR/EUSR said. “Voters must make sure that their would-be representatives know how to turn this advocacy into focused and effective support for reform.”

The full text of the HR/EUSR’s speech can be found at www.ohr.int