

Article by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “EU Should Acknowledge its Own Success in BiH”

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This month I led a delegation of entrepreneurs from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to the CEBIT technology fair in Hannover. When I was Minister for Posts and Telecommunications in Germany in the 1980s I was one of the founders of CEBIT, now the largest information technology fair in the world. So I was keen to use my good offices in Hannover to introduce BiH entrepreneurs to prospective international partners.

I was pleased with the results. The BiH businesspeople marketed themselves and their companies competitively. Prospective partners fielded sensible questions – about labour costs in BiH, infrastructure, human capital, the fiscal environment and so on.

The exchange was based on practical and timely business information. I often wish that this level of straightforward dialogue were more common in the political sphere.

Unfortunately, however, BiH is often spoken of in terms that are at least a decade out of date. Prospective investors want to know about telecom rates; journalists and politicians are more inclined to ask about crime rates. (For the record, the street crime rate in Sarajevo compares favourably with that of most cities in the EU).

The moribund postwar economy of the mid 90s is now growing at Central European levels and diversifying (hence those entrepreneurs in Hannover). A modern electronic personal identity document system that complies with EU standards has been introduced, rendering BiH identity documents secure and forgery-resistant. I am optimistic that even the communal disharmony deriving from the tragedy in the country in the early 90s can eventually be turned around so that BiH is now on its way to normality and eventually to a gradual reversion to its customary and well-established model of tolerance and inclusiveness.

Yet, when I led the BiH delegation to Hannover my office had to sponsor the visa applications of some of the participants.

This is absurd.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a success story for which the European Union can claim a good deal of the credit. But the EU appears almost unwilling to acknowledge the extent to which BiH's recovery has succeeded – hence the continuing visa requirement.

The BiH authorities opened Stabilisation and Association negotiations with the EU in November last year – after completing an ambitious reform programme which has brought the judiciary into line with European standards, unified the armed forces, and set in place the mechanisms of a successful free-market economy (5 percent annual growth for the last four years).

Accession to the EU is the platform of every major BiH political party, and the EU is therefore in a powerful position to make this goal conditional on the domestic authorities fulfilling their obligations (including full cooperation with the ICTY).

The EU must use this conditionality robustly, and as often as is required. At the same time, it *must* understand that BiH is

making substantial progress – this acknowledgement will of itself increase the momentum of the progress that has already been achieved.

In other words, it's not just what the BiH authorities do that will determine the success or failure of this country's transition to full membership of the club of prosperous and democratic European states – it's also what the EU does.

On the one hand, the EU expresses the hope that the BiH economy will continue to grow. On the other, it requires businesspeople from BiH to queue up at embassies in Sarajevo and wait for days if not weeks to get the necessary travel documents. Imagine if EU businesspeople had to apply for visas every time they wanted to visit clients in other markets! We would regard that as a restraint on trade!

Visa requirements were introduced for BiH citizens only in the 1990s. In those pre-Schengen days, people from this part of the world traveled to Western Europe freely, something that probably accelerated the collapse of Communism. At this point I am not lobbying for a complete dropping of visa requirements. I am arguing that we should introduce a system of visa *facilitation* that would benefit pensioners, students, academics and businesspeople from BiH.. The European Commission has made suggestions for facilitation which lead in the right direction, but which do not yet include the category of frequent business travelers. I intend to highlight this point at the EU Interior Ministers' conference in Vienna in early May.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a small market democracy that is now exerting a major effort to integrate fully in the EU. Realistically, membership is still a long way off, but the need to bring this buoyant country closer to Europe now is obvious. EU visa requirements for targeted groups of BiH citizens should be eased and eased soon. For the sake of sustaining and enhancing what is already a European success

story.

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