

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: "BiH Must Fulfill all Conditions Before Visa Requirements are Abolished "

*The most important element is the Citizens Identity Protection System or CIPS * Review of citizens and passports issued during the war*

In one of Dnevni Avaz' daily "public opinion polls" last week, 77% of the citizens agreed that I should propose to the Peace Implementation Council the abolition of the visa regime for the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Increasingly, even parties and politicians call on me to do this.

I would like to be able to do this. I know how much BiH citizens suffer under the visa restrictions, how complicated they make each trip abroad, and how humiliating the pursuit of a visa can be.

Rumanian Experience

However, there are reasons of entirely technical nature for the strict visa restrictions. The steps that need to be taken to get rid of them are equally technical and can be taken only by the BiH authorities.

Until recently, Romania was in the same position as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then, at the beginning of this year, the European Union granted Romanian citizens visa-free entry. This was done on the basis of measures that Romania had implemented under its "Visa Action Plan."

These measures were aimed at making sure that illegal immigrants can no longer transit through Romania to Western Europe, that the Romanian authorities have clear evidence of every citizen's identity documents, which, in addition, had to be safe from forgery and misuse, and that they know of all foreigners who are entering Romania. So, Romania introduced a new passport with appropriate security features, established a secure centralized and computerized system for issuing passports to its citizens and visas to foreigners, and professionalized its Border Police in order to enhance its border control capabilities.

Further, Romania adapted its own visa policy toward third countries so that it matches the EU's visa policy. It passed EU-modeled laws on immigration and asylum, on the repatriation of Romanian nationals who are found to be illegally residing in EU member states, and on citizenship and stateless persons. And Romania made significant efforts to curb human trafficking, illegal immigration and corruption.

These are the requirements that need to be met for visa restrictions to be lifted.

Unfortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina currently has shortcomings in all these fields. Fortunately, the authorities, with the assistance of the International Community, are working on fixing all of these problems.

The most important element is the "Citizens Identification Protection System," CIPS for short, which will establish order and clarity in the messy field of BiH personal documents. Two weeks ago, the Council of Ministers signed a contract on the implementation of CIPS. Over the next couple of years, BiH citizens will be issued with new ID cards and driving licenses with all the necessary security features. There will be central computerized registries for passports, ID cards, JMBG and residence, and the issuing systems will be centrally managed by the State authorities, so that there is one authority that knows at all times who has which documents. The new passport, which I imposed in 2000, is already secure; passport issuance and data administration will be integrated in the CIPS system.

When it comes to BiH passports, BiH must also complete its examination of who was granted BiH citizenship and passports during and after the war, and revoke those that were issued under dubious circumstances. Cases such as that of Enaam Arnaout, the director of the aid agency "Benevolence International Foundation", who at the end of April was arrested in Chicago as a suspected Al-Qaeda sponsor and who was carrying a BiH passport, do not help BiH's quest to be granted visa-free travel.

Thanks to the State Border Service, Bosnia and Herzegovina's control of its borders has dramatically improved, and the number of illegal immigrants transiting through BiH to Western Europe has decreased. Now, BiH must ensure adequate funding for the full deployment of this service and its continued work.

Law on Asylum and Immigration

BiH must also pass and then efficiently implement the new Law on Asylum and Immigration in order to establish the conditions for entry and residence of foreigners in BiH as well as the rules governing expulsions. It has to bring the visa criteria it applies to the citizens of other countries into line with the EU visa regime, and pass other legislation that will prove to Western Europe that BiH adequately supervises its own citizens and any individuals who enter its territory, and that BiH will not serve as an illegal entry point to Europe.

Once all of this is done, BiH will have a case to demand the abolition of visa restrictions applied by other countries to its citizens. This could be as early as next year. It depends on how effectively the authorities carry out their task.

When they have done it, then they, too, can make the case for the abolition of the visa regime, and rightly so. This will count more than if any international official does it – though, I am sure, we all will be happy to use our influence to support them. As the example of Romania shows, getting rid of visa restrictions is an achievable goal. It depends on the resolution of a few issues, which only the authorities of this state can resolve.

The International Community has done a great deal

The International Community has already done a lot to help accomplish this objective. Two years ago, I imposed the State Border Service, UNMIBH has helped establish it, and it is still to a large extent financed by the International Community. I amended the Law on Travel Documents, introducing the new single and secure passport. My Office has encouraged and supported the BiH Government in passing the CIPS laws and implementing the project, and will continue to assist it. We have also worked closely with the authorities in introducing a more secure visa system for foreigners in BiH, and have helped draft many important laws. Now it is up to the domestic authorities to finalize all this work.