

High Representative writes to Foreign Ministers arguing that BiH is “ready to join” the Council of Europe

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, welcomes the decision of the Political Affairs Committee of the Council of Europe to recommend the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Council of Europe. It is now up to the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to take a final decision on the membership.

In this regard, the High Representative, in a letter addressed to the Foreign Ministers of the Council of Europe Member States, stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina should enter the Council of Europe as soon as possible, preferably by the end of the year. “I believe the basic question is whether Bosnia and Herzegovina is ready to join. My answer would be a firm yes”, the letter reads. The High Representative impressed upon the Foreign Ministers that BiH’s accession “is an opportunity that should not be missed to bring this war-torn yet slowly recovering country closer to Europe where it belongs.”

The High Representative wrote that not all the accession conditions have been met, especially in the field of human rights where he feels progress has been slow, but he expressed his belief that it was fair to say that progress has been made. He especially referred to the adoption of the Election Law in August 2001, which marked an important milestone after years of delay due to obstructionist behaviour in Parliament, and to progress in refugee return.

The High Representative stated that the pre-accession conditions that remain to be fulfilled could now be included in a list of post-accession criteria. He wrote the authorities should firmly commit themselves to fulfilling these conditions, which include better protection of human rights, the further strengthening of the state institutions, the harmonisation of the education systems and the creation of an independent judiciary.

The High Representative argued in his letter that Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession to the Council would reaffirm its statehood both internally and internationally and be a sign of strong support to the reform-oriented and non-nationalist forces in power. He further stated that for the citizens of the country, it would be the first step on the road towards Europe.

The High Representative also elaborated on the practical consequences of BiH’s membership of the Council of Europe as it would grant its citizens access to the European Court of Human Rights.

In the past couple of weeks, the High Representative has been in close personal contact with the Council of Europe’s Secretary General, Mr Walter Schwimmer, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Lord Russell-Johnston, the Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee, Terry Davis, and the Special Rapporteur of the Political Affairs Committee, Mr Laszlo Surjan, discussing the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to this distinguished organisation.