

HR/EUSR To Highlight BiH's Progress; Lobby for Visa Facilitation

The High Representative/EU Special Representative Christian Schwarz-Schilling is in Rome to attend the annual congress of the European Peoples' Party, where he is meeting senior party leaders and other prominent politicians from all over Europe. He will highlight the political and economic progress that BiH has achieved over the last couple of years and point out the ongoing reform processes in the context of BiH's SAA negotiations. As part of this, he will lobby in favour of the beginning of a gradual easing of the current visa restrictions.

He will also point out that at a time when much international attention in the region focuses on Montenegro's referendum on independence and talks on Kosovo's final status, attention should not be distracted from BiH's efforts to get closer to the EU.

"BiH has made enormous progress and has completed an ambitious reform programme. Moving ahead on visa facilitation as proposed by the European Commission would send a powerful signal to BiH's authorities and citizens that the EU recognizes this progress," said the HR/EUSR.

"If the EU hopes that BiH's economy continues to grow, then it must make it easier for BiH's businessmen to travel to the EU in order to conduct their business. How can businessmen cultivate prospective business partners in the EU, if they have to wait for days – if not weeks – in order to obtain a visa to travel to the EU," he added.

Other topics for discussion will be constitutional change and the transition from the OHR to an office of the EUSR.

The European Peoples' Party is the largest political group in the European Parliament, representing some 37 percent of the total number of MPs who sit in the parliament.

Among the people who will attend the EPP congress are the President of the EU Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi, German PM Angela Merkel and Austrian PM Wolfgang Schüssel.

In Rome on Thursday, the HR/EUSR will also meet with the Pope and the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with Foreign States Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo. The HR/EUSR will brief the Pope on progress that has been made in preparing BiH for further integration in Europe, including changes to the constitution, and he will emphasise the indispensable role of religious leaders in fostering the reconciliation that is a fundamental tenet of all the main religions practised in BiH.