

Interview: Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “I Start Lobbying for a More Liberal Visa Regime”

*European Union and European Commission count on a strong state government * If Parliamentarians do not accept constitutional changes, then they have to offer an alternative * Elections are the highest test of democracy*

Among his priorities for the next 12 months, the High Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, includes a more liberal visa regime.

He points out that he will talk to the Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel very soon, as well as to the EU Ministries of Interior, in order to draw their attention to the issue of freer movement of BiH businessmen.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: We are pumping money into BiH, because we want it to recover and to grow economically stronger, but when this money needs to be “fertilized”, we set up obstacles for it – says the High Representative to “Dnevni Avaz”.

First experience

He points out that he faced that issue during his recent visit to the Science and Technology Fair in Hannover , at which the BiH entrepreneurs offered products of a good quality, but they faced the product maintenance and service problem due to

barriers of the visa regime to BiH.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: We have to change the picture of BiH abroad. I have to admit that I did not expect to deal with that. However, it is becoming more obvious that I have to lobby for BiH in European capitals in order to change their understanding of this country.

BiH is situated in the heart of Europe . EU members will soon surround BiH and this region, thus it has to be clear to Europe that this will be an integral part of the EU. Without it, we are only going to face higher risks.

Dnevni Avaz: Yet, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel is advocating a privileged partnership with the countries of the Western Balkans rather than full EU membership.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: I am not in favour of these statements due to the connotations they bear. I can talk about the EU standpoint, which emphasizes that obligations and commitments given in Thessalonika should be respected. The German government will support the implementation of these commitments.

Dnevni Avaz: The constitutional debate seems to be the most current and the most dynamic one. You are not significantly involved in that though.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: Although I understand disagreements of some people, who think that changes are not profound enough, that the Entities are still remaining very strong, I do not agree with them. I believe that the BiH state should be stronger after these changes.

When I took over this duty, negotiations about the Constitution were in a finishing phase, so I did not consider necessary to get involved. Nevertheless, the second stage follows in 2007, in which we are about to take a more significant role.

Situation is not bad

Dnevni Avaz: It seems that the second phase will never take place. The parliamentary majority is not in favour of the changes.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: If Parliamentarians decided to reject the offered proposals, then they have to offer an alternative. The current situation is not bad, but the agreed changes in the Constitution are better. One can claim that what was agreed is neither good nor sufficient. However, you have to be realistic in politics, and go step by step.

Dnevni Avaz: What would happen if there were no changes? Would it also affect the OHR's plan to transfer into the EUSR?

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: Psychologically, this failure would mean a big step backwards and it would not only have an effect on the OHR's plans. The EU and the European Commission count on a strong state government, so if this small step toward its strengthening cannot be made, it might happen that doubts about the BiH road to Europe start growing.

Even if that would fail, and the negotiations on the signing the SAA would continue at the same pace, it could not be diminished psychologically.

The comment would start circulating that the agreed changes were a small step forward, but that BiH politicians were not even able to conduct them. The failure of the constitutional change would certainly be understood as a bad sign.

Dnevni Avaz: Do you talk to politicians about that?

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: Yes. And I keep telling them that it is better to make smaller steps than to stay stuck. If we miss this opportunity, the next one will only be in 2010! I believe it is high time for political parties to think thoroughly about the interests of citizens.

Dnevni Avaz: What do you intend to do in the next 12 months?

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: My highest priority will be improving the economic situation. I want to create better conditions for small and medium-sized enterprises. This sector can bring great changes to society. We want to offer less bureaucracy, the business registration process should be changed, and better solutions should be found to help them.

Also, freedom to travel internationally must be improved so that people can cooperate among themselves, but also work on improving and maintaining their products.

Recently, along with a group of BiH businessmen I visited the CeBit in Hannover . One Bosnian offered a software program of very good quality to the German partners. The Germans were very interested and asked him how quickly he could come to Germany to fix a possible breakdown. The BiH businessman said that he should wait for a visa up to four weeks, but he would give his best to fix that problem in 10 days. The German partners burst out laughing and explained that they could wait maximally up to 24 hours.

Then I realized that the relation we have with BiH is unfair. Therefore, I would talk to EU people to make the visa regime for BiH more liberal.

Furthermore, I will send a message to the public that the elections are the highest test of democracy. The forthcoming elections will provide the government for the next four years, thus people have to understand it clearly and responsibly. The media have an outstanding role in this. Candidates and party programmes must be clearly presented and compared to programmes of other parties. This is a huge issue and I have to explain to people the significance of turning out for the elections and voting.

To convince the Leaders

Dnevni Avaz: Are there any more priorities?

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: The next priority will be an attempt to convince the political leaders to accept and implement the Agreement on Constitutional Change. This is a necessary requirement for the start of a new phase of constitutional negotiations after the elections.

One more priority is to assist the BiH government as much as we can (if necessary to whisper to them as in an exam) successfully to complete the SAA negotiations. I am particularly pleased that European officials expressed satisfaction with BiH's preparations for the SAA negotiations.

Therefore, BiH needs a little bit more encouragement to start things going. Public opinion is quite negative.

Hard Talks with Milorad Dodik

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: Recently, I talked to the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. He convinced me that he did not have the intention of hindering police reform. He told me that the letter on police reform which was recently published by the media was not meant for the public and that he was expressing certain standpoints, but he did not have an intention to obstruct.

He said that he would act in this reform as he has been doing so far; he would not lead it, but would also not assist in any obstruction.

I was glad to hear this, since we had very hard talks about this both on the phone and in person.

Also, we talked about financial issues, the VAT income disbursement...

I am against Dixon's removal

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: I do not think that the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Indirect Taxation Authority, Joly Dixon, should be removed.

My plan is to leave this position to a qualified citizen of this country, but the ground for this has not yet been prepared. This is an election year and I want this transfer to happen immediately after the elections.

Bonn Powers

Christian Schwarz-Schilling: The Bonn Powers were created by the Peace Implementation Council and I have already received approval to settle the issue of removed politicians, so that after the OHR is closed, this issue will have been dealt with. Those who are not in court, who have not been accused specifically ... must have their status resolved. I do not want that we end up in the same situation as with the decertified policemen.

This means that removed individuals can address us and their case will be considered very thoroughly. The only exception concerns individuals who have been sanctioned due to non-cooperation with the ICTY.