

Speech by HR/EUSR Christian Schwarz-Schilling at a Roundtable on the Subject of Obstacles on BiH's Path toward the EU: How to Obtain a More Liberal Visa Regime in BiH and the Region Joint Institutions Building, Sarajevo 12 September 2006

Concrete Proposals for a Visa-Free Future

Ladies and Gentlemen,

No issue better illustrates the gulf that exists between empty political rhetoric and concrete proposals for improving the lives of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina than that of visa requirements.

The present visa regime is commercially damaging, personally irritating and – in terms of Bosnia and Herzegovina's international standing – demeaning.

I doubt there's a politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina who would argue *against* making it easier for citizens to travel to the European Union.

Everyone *wants* visa-free travel. But not everyone wants to take the steps that are necessary to achieve it.

Let me be clear. We are talking about two things:

- visa facilitation, and
- visa liberalisation.

If all goes well, we could have a mandate to introduce visa facilitation by next year.

How quickly visa liberalisation – visa free travel to the European Union – will follow depends on how quickly the necessary political and administrative steps can be taken.

As you have heard from Ambassador Humphreys, visa facilitation means simplifying visa-issuance procedures for certain categories of traveller, simplifying the documentary evidence that has to be submitted with visa applications, increasing the issuance of multiple-entry visas, issuing visas with longer validity, waiving or reducing handling fees for certain categories of traveller, and reducing the time it takes to process applications.

Each and all of these would be warmly welcomed by every citizen of this country who has had to go through the lengthy and inconvenient process of applying for a visa.

Visa facilitation will have a positive impact on the economy as companies will only be able to compete effectively on the international stage when their employees can travel freely to look after their customers' needs.

Visa facilitation would also send important messages to both Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a country on the outer edges of legality and normality but a full-fledged and respectable member of the European family; and
- that Europe recognises the progress this country has made in its post-war recovery.

For these reasons, I have been lobbying for visa facilitation since even before I took up my position as High Representative and EU Special Representative.

In June this year I had an extensive discussion on this issue with Franco Frattini, European Commission Vice President and Commissioner responsible for justice, freedom and security.

Commissioner Frattini was positive and has remained so.

The improving prospects for eventual visa-free travel for BiH citizens are consistent with the progress that Bosnia and Herzegovina has made towards establishing a European-standard system of document management and migration control.

This system is not yet fully in place, but much has been done. To recap: the State Border Service and the State Investigation and Protection Agency are operational; the Council of Ministers has adopted an Integrated Border Management Strategy; and Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted strategies on immigration, asylum and visas in accordance with EU Aquis.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has also signed agreements on police cooperation with ten countries, and it now issues international-standard passports, ID cards and drivers' licences.

In addition, a specialised service for immigration control has been established and European-standard legislation is being enacted to cover the issue of resident aliens. A detention centre for illegal immigrants is currently being set up, and the authorities are in the midst of a comprehensive review of naturalised citizens.

Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina has established a centralised information system that controls the issue of visas for entry to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, obstacles remain that must be overcome for visa-free

travel to become a reality and they must be overcome by those candidates standing for election on 1 October.

So, what do they have to do?

Well, for a start they have to complete the overarching BiH reform agenda. Let me be clear. Unless we have police reform and unless we ensure cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, citizens of this country will continue to wait in line for visas.

Voters should understand that any candidate who claims to be *for* visa-free travel but has opposed these measures is trying to square a circle.

What specific, concrete steps must be taken with a view to securing a change in the visa regime?

The authorities should initiate, as soon as possible, the following:

- The Civil Affairs Ministry should ensure that Entity and Cantonal Interior Ministries begin entering data in the state-level vehicle registration data base;
- The Civil Affairs Ministry should also ensure that steps are taken to integrate the passport system into the CIPS citizens' registry system;
- The Civil Affairs Ministry should accelerate the introduction of a new passport that meets International Civil Aviation Organisation and EU requirements for biometrics;
- The Ministry of Security should draft the necessary by-laws to set up an Immigration Information System that will allow the centralised registration and personalisation of residency permits; and
- The Ministry of Security should begin implementing the adopted Integrated Border Management strategy to

prioritise the security controls at the borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude by reminding participants at today's roundtable of the conclusions of last year's discussion. They make interesting reading. Last year this roundtable found that there was a "clear consensus" on visa facilitation among all political parties.

In order to turn this consensus into positive action, the meeting concluded that what was needed was:

- a strengthening of the rule of law;
- a more efficient struggle against organised crime; and
- the successful conclusion of police reform, together with better cooperation with the Hague Tribunal.

Sounds familiar doesn't it?

These things will hugely benefit the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina , but, as we all know, implementing a wish list is harder than drawing one up.

Today, every candidate running for election is a vocal advocate of visa-free travel for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina . Voters must make sure that their would-be representatives know how to turn this advocacy into focused and effective support for reform.

Thank you