Press release | 14.07.2009

Western Balkans

Insult after injury: Barroso Commission excludes Bosnia-Herzegovina from visa liberalisation

The European Commission is tomorrow expected to announce plans for a new Western Balkans visa regime that will include Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, but exclude Bosnia-Herzegovina. **Daniel Cohn-Bendit**, Co-President of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, commented:

"The Commission's plan to exclude Bosnia-Herzegovina from visa liberalisation in the Western Balkans adds insult to injury to the people who suffered most during the war that raged less than two decades ago.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU aspirations are being hamstrung by the Bosnian Serb leadership, who are agitating for secession. By granting visa-free EU access to Serbia, the Commission de facto extends the same privileges to Bosnian Serbs because of their dual citizenship, while blocking and discriminating against Bosnian Muslims. Bosnian Croats already enjoy visa-free travel to EU member states because of dual citizenship with Croatia. Visa liberalisation is a rare opportunity to foster hope and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. The proposed uneven-handed action will instead formalise ethnic divisions, reward the obstruction tactics of nationalist politicians and deepen resentment in the region.

The Commission is right to politically reward the pro-European faction in Serbia, but it is hypocritical and morally abject to bar one section of the Bosnian population from the same privileges on technical grounds. Aside from other technical requirements that Serbia also fails to fulfil, the single crucial obstacle to visa-free travel is the introduction of biometric passports, which is due to occur in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia at the same time.

Inept during the war and inconsistent in its aftermath, EU pretensions to present a democratic and multiethnic model for the Western Balkans look less credible than ever. Even the timing of the Commission's announcement is insensitive and anti-democratic, coming days after commemoration of Srebrenica and precisely when the European Parliament is in transition of mandate and unavailable for political consultation. Commissioners Barroso, Rehn and Barrot are pushing for a major, wrong-headed policy change at a time when the current EU Commission is in the twilight of its mandate and without Parliament endorsement for a new term."

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