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‘I Dream of Bihać and Bosnia’: Bosniaks from Prizren waiting to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina without visas

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Nevzeta Imami from Prizren (Kosovo*) could visit her home town of Bihac in Bosnia and Herzegovina after two decades, following the announcement of movement with ID cards only made by the foreign ministers of the Western Balkans (WB).

In addition to this agreement on freedom of movement, two other agreements have been approved – on recognition of higher education qualifications and recognition of professional qualifications of doctors of medicine, dentists and architects – which are to be signed on 3 November within the Berlin Process.

Apart from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only economy in the region which does not recognise the independence of Kosovo*; however, it recognises its passport as a valid document.

Hence, until now, citizens of Kosovo* needed a visa to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as of 2014 the same has been applicable to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina wishing to travel to Kosovo*, as reciprocity measures on visa regime were introduced at that time.

So far, those living in Kosovo* and having family in Bosnia and Herzegovina and vice versa faced issues with obtaining a visa, and there were even cases when people could not say goodbye to their dying loved ones.

'I dream of Bihać and Bosnia'

Nevzeta Imami, close to retirement as Professor of Bosnian Language in Prizren, shared such an experience with Radio Free Europe (RFE).

Namely, none of the family members from Bosnia and Herzegovina could come to Kosovo* when her mother, who was a native of Bihać, passed away 2 years ago.

She herself has not been to Bihać, located in northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina, since 2000. One of the reasons is visa regime which has been in force until now.

“I dream of being in Bosnia and in Bihać where I used to go as a child to visit my uncle,” Imami told RFE.

Arifka Ljatifi is a female poet from Prizren and has close relatives in Sarajevo whom she could not visit with Kosovo* documents.

That is the reason she applied for identity documents issued by Serbian authorities in 2019 and went to Sarajevo to attend a poetry gathering. She used this opportunity to meet up with her relatives.

“It felt humiliating indeed when I went to one of Bosnia and Herzegovina embassies in the region and was rejected. I have a Serbian ID, but I would certainly prefer to travel freely with Kosovo* ID. First, I will visit Sarajevo,” she says.

Lifting visa requirements with Bosnia and Herzegovina is a “great news” for Idriz Murati from Nebregošta near Prizren.

“I am happy that freedom of movement and visa waiver between Kosovo* and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be put in place soon. For me, this is the best news in the last I do not know how many years. First I am going to Sarajevo, then to Mostar,” stated Murati.

'The end of agony'

Muharrem Zejnullahu, President of Albanian Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and former first Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Albania, also hopes that the “agony” of visa regime between the two economies will be over soon.

He underlines that Albanians living in Bosnia and Herzegovina are facing “insurmountable problems” when they want to go to Kosovo*.

“Even people who lost their loved ones, family members in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were not able to visit their children’s graves. Well, now this opportunity will be created, I hope,” says Zejnullahu.

He emphasised that there were many students from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Kosovo* before the war in 1990s and says he hopes that cooperation in the area of education will be restored.

Furthermore, Zejnullahu said that the current visa regime had greatly affected intercultural cooperation and cited as an example that not a single theatre play from Kosovo* was performed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last 30 years.

“There are some developments when it comes to film festivals. Sarajevo Film Festival went extraordinary lengths to try to bring people from Kosovo* and their new films,” he said.

Institutional connections

Usmen Baldži, former Deputy Education Minister in Kosovo* Government from Bosniak community, has not been in his mother economy for 30 years.

He recounts that he tried to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina on business or get a visa and visit his numerous relatives; however without success.

“It is known that all this time we have been hindered to move freely. At the very least, it was illogical that we could go to Serbia with our ID but not to Bosnia and Herzegovina,” says Baldži.

Earlier, the President of Kosovo* Vjosa Osmani emphasised the fact that Kosovo* has an agreement on freedom of movement with IDs with Serbia and that there is no reason such an agreement should not be made with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kosovo* and Serbia reached an agreement on freedom of movement back in 2011, at the very beginning of dialog between the two sides on normalisation of their relations.

Furthermore, Baldži underlines that travel with ID means a lot to Bosniaks from Kosovo* – this would improve their rights, including institutional links with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“To use the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to freely study there and acquire new knowledge, to have our diplomas recognised... This will also condition the freedom of movement of people, goods and capital,” he believes.

Almedin Fejza, representative of Bosniaks in Consultative Council for Communities operating within the Office of Kosovo* President, points out to similar benefits.

He sees possible travel with ID cards as final abolishment of “meaningless visa regime between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*”.

He adds that he himself went through the painful process of getting a visa to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressing his belief that freedom of movement would certainly contribute to better position of Bosniak community.

“I am convinced that this will have a major positive impact on cooperation between Kosovo* and Bosnia in all areas of societal activities; connecting youth, deepening cultural, political and economic cooperation and in the future create conditions for a normal life and, for us Bosniaks, facilitate cooperation with our mother economy,” he says.

Better position of young people

Movement with ID cards would mean a lot to young people from Kosovo*, stresses Musa Bajmak, President of Kosovo* Association of Bosniak Students and Youth.

He explains that until now young people could not study in Bosnia and Herzegovina and says he is happy to see that this could change.

“I do not know whether any of young Bosniaks from Kosovo* tried to travel to Sarajevo in previous years. I did not, as I knew beforehand that I will not get a visa. It was mostly done by those who have dual citizenship of North Macedonia, Montenegro or Serbia,” says Musa Bajmak.

He believes that young people from Bosniak community would very much like to visit Sarajevo, adding that he will organise the first student visit if the visa regime is abolished.

What has been agreed?

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu said on 21 October that Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo* reached an agreement on visa-free movement of citizens.

“Agreement on movement with IDs in the Western Balkans tears down the last remaining visa wall in the region,” said Bregu on this occasion within the Berlin Process.

The so-called Berlin Process is a format of annual meetings which German Government initiated in 2014 at the time a conference on Western Balkans was held in Berlin. Its aim is to strengthen cooperation between European Union and Western Balkans, as well as within the region, and step up region’s integration into the EU.