

PDHR Donald Hays and Members of BiH Presidency Visit Visegrad

The Principal Deputy High Representative, Donald Hays, visited Visegrad today with the members of the Presidency of BiH, Beriz Belkic, Zivko Radisic and Jozo Krizanovic. Ambassador Hays and the Presidency members met with returnees to the area, local officials, business people and youth representatives.

Speaking to Visegrad officials, Ambassador Hays noted that efforts are being made to sustain International Community funding for the returns process – despite the fact that overall foreign aid for BiH is on a steep decline – and he called on the RS Ministry for Refugees and Displaced Persons to continue to make funds available so as to stimulate two-way return.

Ambassador Hays also noted that the local authorities can help the returns process effectively by resolving infrastructure problems and facilitating the reconnection of homes to utilities services.

Visegrad's Property Law Implementation rate now stands at 35 percent, which represents a considerable improvement. However, this remains well below the national average. Ambassador Hays observed that Visegrad, which desperately needs direct investment, will not attract a useful volume of commercial funds as long as its Property Law Implementation rate remains modest. Investors won't put their money into communities that are not proactive in the returns process. This is, among other things, because the conditions that encourage return – the rule of law, the elimination of bureaucratic bottlenecks, and the development of social infrastructure, such as schools,

health services and housing stock – also encourage investment.

During the roundtable discussion with local youth representatives, Ambassador Hays urged young people to become politically active. In a region where the ruling parties have singularly failed to deliver economic recovery, it is important that young people make their voice heard and bring their creativity and energy to the political process, he said.

“It is crucial that you vote in the October elections,” the Principal Deputy High Representative told representatives of young people. “The youth vote can make a difference between a regression into extremism accompanied by economic stagnation, or a transition to modern democratic politics accompanied by economic growth.”

The members of the Presidency also emphasised the crucial role of young people in BiH’s political, social and economic development. Chairman of the Presidency Belkic described the choice between organising political activity on the basis of ethnicity or on the basis of interest and secured a unanimous endorsement from participants at the meeting that economic interests, not nationalist ones, should be a main motivation for political action. Member of the Presidency Radisic said that the Presidency would help young people fight for their rights. He also stressed the importance to BiH of a democratic RS, and the importance to the RS of a democratic BiH. Member of the Presidency Krizanovic noted that although there is still a huge amount of work to be done, BiH has made significant progress in the last two years. It was agreed that a delegation of youths from all over BiH should attend a forthcoming Presidency session and raise issues of particular concern to young citizens. The Presidency and Ambassador Hays reached full consensus about the ways that BiH should develop in the future.

Speaking to returnees, Ambassador Hays reviewed efforts made by the local authorities, NGOs and international agencies,

including the OHR, to facilitate return, and he suggested that livestock, tools, tractors and moto-cultivators might be made available to a soon-to-be-established returnees' agricultural cooperative.