

FENA: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

FENA: Having in mind that the general election and the start of the election campaign in BiH are approaching, what are your expectations from the forthcoming elections?

Valentin Inzko: I have two sets of expectations for the upcoming election campaign and the elections themselves. My expectations from politicians and candidates is that they provide clear explanations on how they intend to tackle the most pressing problems facing citizens such as job creation as well as how they intend to unlock progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration. What we don't need is another election campaign of scare-mongering and gutter politics.

My expectations of voters are very simple – that they turn up at the ballot boxes on 12 October and vote. My message is: if you don't vote, you let others decide your future for you. It is as simple as that.

FENA: Although the election campaign has not yet officially started, there have already been numerous examples of inappropriate rhetoric and squabbling through media and on rallies. How will your Office treat such occurrences?

Valentin Inzko: We are following the election campaign closely as we always do. I call upon citizens to report inappropriate behaviour during the campaign to the competent authorities, and in particular the Central Election Commission, which has the right to sanction candidates if they break the election rules.

There are legal provisions that treat violations of the free decision-making of voters as a criminal offence. I call on all candidates and politicians to respect the democratic processes and realise that the intimidation of voters is unacceptable. If anyone fails to understand this, they must be prepared to

accept the sanctions that have been put in place which includes potential criminal processes with prison sentences up to three or even five years.

I am encouraged by reports that several NGOs will actively monitor the election process all the way through from the campaign stage to the counting of ballots.

FENA: What is your comment on the fact that there are more political candidates for individual offices, in particular for the Bosniak Presidency member? Can that lead to a further increase of the already high number of politicians that will pass the election census, which can slow down the process of government formation?

Valentin Inzko: Generally, I think that it is a positive trend to have genuine competition for posts. Voters have choices to make at these elections. Anybody claiming that they don't have a choice is doing little more than trying to find an excuse not to vote. There are new faces, there are old faces. There are positive candidates and less positive ones. There are candidates who have fulfilled their promises and others who have not. There are many options out there. I hope that voters will look for concrete answers from politicians when they decide who to vote for – in particular answers on how politicians are going to solve key problems facing citizens in particular job creation and the fight against corruption.

FENA: In your opinion, was the response of the current authorities to the natural disaster, which endangered tens of thousands of people in both BiH entities and caused damages in the amount of several billion KM, adequate?

Valentin Inzko: Given the magnitude of the disaster, the relief effort was and remains a big logistical challenge. I remain shocked by what I saw when I visited as many municipalities as I could in the immediate aftermath of the floods. What was positive is that the people I met reached out

to help each other – they were not interested in administrative boundaries and they were not interested in the names of the people they were helping – ethnic affiliation was not an issue. The people of this country want to come together to build a better future for themselves and their children and I have no doubt whatsoever that they are looking for politicians who can heal this country and make this happen rather than constantly opening up the wounds of the past so they can rule on the basis of fear.

The assessment as to whether the authorities have responded adequately to the floods should first and foremost be made by the people who live in the flooded areas and I am sure they will make their own assessment, based on their own experience.

FENA: Do you believe that the expectations of the endangered population will be fulfilled, in accordance with the conclusions and promises from the donors' conference held in Brussels?

Valentin Inzko: I have no doubts that the donors have and will fulfil their pledges. The ball is in the court of the domestic authorities here in BiH to enable the donor assistance to be distributed effectively. I received information that the authorities have already received quite a lot of financial assistance.

FENA: Having in mind that the beginning of the new school year is approaching, and that the problems of children of Bosniak returnees in some areas in the RS with regard to the introduction of national subject group in the curriculum have still not been addressed, does the OHR intend to get more actively involved in the resolution of this problem, so that the children can finally go back to school?

Valentin Inzko: I am very disappointed that such little progress has been made across the country by the competent

authorities at all levels to start delivering the positive changes that are necessary to ensure that every child's right to education is fully respected. More should have been done before the start of the school year to resolve all outstanding issues.

The situation in Konjevic Polje and Vrbanjci illustrates the need to deal with these issues as a matter of urgency. In the meantime, the parents and the RS Ministry of Education need to re-engage in a direct dialogue without any further delay. It is imperative to agree on concrete solutions that will ensure that children return to classrooms and get a proper education. There is no alternative to all stakeholders to engaging in sincere discussions in view of finding a way forward in the best interest of the children.

The fact that that the Conference of Ministers of Education has not yet developed durable long-term solutions in education does not absolve each and every competent Minister of his personal responsibility to act to ensure children's basic right to education is met in a manner that is non-discriminatory and inclusive. I take this opportunity to call on all the ministers of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina to do all they can to resolve all outstanding disputes in their areas of responsibility so that children can focus on learning, free from disputes.