Op-ed by HR Valentin Inzko: Put Politics Back In The Service Of The People

Two weeks from now, Croatia will join the European Union and Croatian citizens will enjoy the freedoms, rights and opportunities that go with EU membership.

As Croatia takes this huge and exciting leap forward, and others in the region stride forward, BiH citizens face a less a grim reality of overstretched and underfunded public services, high unemployment, genuine poverty and rampant corruption underpinned by an approach to politics whereby the interests of citizens are time and again trumped by narrow political interests.

As happens in any society, the people reach a point where they say enough. I am surprised this did not happen earlier, but now we are seeing citizens across the country expressing their frustration and dissatisfaction by taking to the streets. Their indignation has found a voice and they want politicians in this country to listen to them. They want them address their problems by taking the decisions that they are paid to make by the taxpayers.

Democracy is not just about going to the polls every four years. It also means being accountable and listening to citizens in-between elections. Peaceful protest is part of a functioning democracy. Peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of expression are the foundation of every democratic society and the fact that they are being proactively utilised by citizens is a positive development for this country. This may not be convenient for a political class that is all too focused on its own priorities, but there should be no doubt that it is incumbent on the authorities to take appropriate measures in order to ensure their peaceful conduct and the safety of all citizens taking into account, on the one hand, the right to peaceful assembly and, on the other hand, the rights and lawful interests – including the right to freedom of movement – of others.

The first reaction of some politicians and certain political parties has been to challenge the right of the people to express their discontent. Others have sought to argue that the demonstrations we have seen are part of a conspiracy that is aimed against a particular constituent people. Some members of parliament have said that they feel threatened. Some have even responded to public dissatisfaction with their work by threatening to do even less than they are currently delivering! Others have questioned the motives of the protestors, alleging that they harbour hidden ethnic or party agendas. This is simply not true and these kinds of responses from politicians and political parties represent a worrying disconnect with the people and a completely misunderstanding of the mood that prevails in the country.

The reality is quite different. The signal being sent by those demonstrating is quite simple: enough obstruction, enough posturing – politics cannot continue as it has until now. In a country where authorities at all levels have systematically failed to address the chronic problems of unemployment, poverty, crime and corruption and where the state parliament cannot make appropriate provision for the allocation of identity numbers to newborn babies – why would someone believe that citizens need a hidden motivation to demonstrate? The political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina is being called to order – not by the International Community but by the people. Every elected official needs to understand that these protests are driven by righteous indignation and completely understandable impatience – not by the discredited mantras of the past twenty years.

I witnessed the conduct of the crowd, the police and the parliamentarians first hand on Thursday night and it was important that the protests in front of parliament ended peacefully. I welcome the reviews that are currently underway by the competent authorities in the public security sector and I share Minister Radoncic's assessment that the institutions can get back to work. It is clear that members of parliament must have freedom of movement; they must be able to discharge their duties unhindered.

The threat by some government leaders and parliamentarians that they will not come to work can only mean that they have not understood the message of the people and that they have not grasped the urgency of what has to be done. It really is time for courage and a new approach to politics that puts citizens first and that tackles the problems they citizens are facing.

The list of laws that must be enacted to protect BiH citizens only *begins* with the JMB legislation. It goes on from

there to the things that must be done for EU and NATO membership, for stopping the downward spiral of the economy and for the people of this country to get back to work so they can live with dignity alongside others in the Euro-Atlantic family of states.

Now is the time for politicians to engage those citizens who are demonstrating and to listen very carefully to them as I did last Thursday night. My message to the political class of this country really is very simple, the people are speaking to you – listen to them and tackle the problems they are raising. To be in politics means doing what every household does on a daily basis: solve problems!

I have no intention of being dramatic, but this is a very important moment for this country. Stagnation or progress – this is the choice. What we need right now is a new approach to politics that delivers positive change and that offer hope to the people.

By taking to the streets to demonstrate, citizens have shown that they have run out of patience for politicians whose only strategy is to carry on making the same moves that have been made for the last twenty years. What they want is politicians and institutions to work and to deliver. Like them, this is what I expect.

Those politicians who fail to move with the times by changing the way they do politics will effectively be ending their own political careers. The choice is theirs, but they should be in no dilemma whatsoever that this is not about them. It is about taking the country in a different – and better – direction where every citizen will be a winner, regardless of their name or where they live. They have a choice to make and, if they are here to serve the people, it is a simple one.