



No more time should be lost

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina went to the polls on 3 October in their sixth general election since independence. The capacity to hold regular free and fair elections is now firmly established. This is a positive sign of normality.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has its natural place in the European Union. The EU is Bosnia and Herzegovina's biggest investor, its biggest trading partner and its biggest source of direct aid. It is providing 100 million Euros every year to help the country achieve the political, economic and social improvements that will prepare it for EU integration. Fostering the emergence of a functional, prosperous and modern democracy capable of securing eventual membership is in the EU's interest as well as in the interest of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But, in return, we expect responsible governments that deliver, and leaders who are prepared to make the difficult compromises that are sometimes required to move closer to the EU.

In the last years, too much energy and time has been lost on negative speeches, nationalistic rhetoric and divisive actions. There has been little progress on the reform agenda. Too many opportunities have been lost. We are disappointed that this year's election campaign sounded like more of the same, rather than a fresh look to the future. Perhaps election rhetoric is just that, and the EU will judge Bosnia and Herzegovina's newly elected leaders on their actions, not on their words alone. But let us be clear: the EU will not accept any challenges to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor any roll-back of reforms that have been undertaken so far to move closer to the European Union.

The EU will do our part. We are ready to move forward in a constructive and creative way and to deliver when the necessary conditions have been met. We would like to establish real partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina and to increase our cooperation.

To this end, we are working on a modified and reinforced presence of the European Union on the ground while implementing the Lisbon Treaty. This Treaty gives the EU one voice and one address in Bosnia and Herzegovina; that will make our cooperation easier, clearer and more efficient - not just with the local authorities, but also with the rest of the international community, which supports Bosnian progress.

It is a fact that moving closer to the EU demands lots of hard work, many changes to the established system, and sometimes very difficult decisions. All this takes time. It is not just because of EU membership conditionality that Bosnia and Herzegovina should go through all this effort; it is about the necessary political, democratic, economic and social transition that will modernise the country.

To move closer to EU membership, the political leaders will need to deal with certain outstanding priorities as a matter of urgency.

Changes to the Constitution are needed to ensure properly implemented universal human rights and to secure functional and efficient institutions that can make prompt decisions if Bosnia and Herzegovina is to become a credible partner in the international community. The unresolved property question hampers the work of public institutions, scares potential foreign investors off and continues to hinder Euro-Atlantic integration. The necessary state-level census in 2011 should provide the data needed for EU integration, for attracting investment, for creating jobs and for proper economic planning.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's newly elected politicians will serve a four-year mandate. Look around at your neighbours in the region, and consider how much progress can be made towards the EU in four years. This is a huge opportunity. It is essential that speedy agreement is reached on forming new governments. Much time has been lost already. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs functioning authorities, deeper reforms and constructive dialogue to provide for a countrywide consensus. That will require skill, effort and creative vision. A great deal of political will and ability to reach consensus was demonstrated to fulfil the conditions of the visa roadmap. The results are clear. Such an approach should be replicated elsewhere.

So, the sooner the new authorities are formed, the sooner the serious work can start for the common goal of Bosnia and Herzegovina's success. The EU will continue vigorously and proactively to help the incoming authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina get the country back on the road of reform and progress leading to EU integration. But we can only help; the real work is up to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

No more time should be lost.

Catherine Ashton is High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/European Commission Vice-President. Stefan Fuele is the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy.