

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Engaged Citizens Forge Progress”



On Monday, I will complete my term as High Representative and EU Special Representative. As I prepare to hand over to my successor, I feel satisfied that I have been able to embark on a path that I believe will benefit this country in the longer term, but regret that it was not possible to make as much progress as I had hoped.

The starting point for taking Bosnia and Herzegovina forward is determining the reality of the situation. Some in Bosnia and Herzegovina argue that the Office of the High Representative should be closed immediately. Others believe that its existence is indispensable to make the current system work. Meanwhile, many in the international community view Bosnia and Herzegovina as a great success story that should now be wound up. And others are frustrated by the time it is taking to carry out key reforms necessary to ensuring long-term peace and stability.

When I took up my duties in February last year, I said that I intended to build a dialogue with the citizens of this country – beyond the political establishment – and I have been true to that promise. In addition to professional politicians, I have sought out the opinions of writers, teachers, artists, workers, religious leaders, musicians, and journalists –

people in all walks of life – and it is this dialogue with a broad cross section of citizens that has sustained my faith in the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is this broad cross section of citizens who must be heard and allowed to contribute to the development of this country.

It is probably just as well that I did not limit my interlocutors to the politicians, since between the time they spent on electioneering and forming governments, there has only been a couple of months in which it has been possible to address concrete issues.

This country will succeed because in myriad ways individuals and groups of individuals are working in their own fields to make things better. Often the good that these people do goes unnoticed. They tend to operate below the political and media radar. Yet in schools and hospitals, in factories and theatres and businesses and homes throughout the country, men and women are working to secure incremental and positive change.

At the beginning of my mandate, I said that the solutions to the challenges Bosnia and Herzegovina faces would come not from the High Representative or the international community but from inside the country itself, and I continue to believe this to be true. I did, however, underestimate the extent of the illusion about Bosnia and Herzegovina's ability to take responsibility for its own future.

Ownership has not flourished as we might have wished, but it may be beginning to take root. Following a general election in which voters were more vocal than ever before, and in an atmosphere where a growing number of pressure groups have started to take the initiative in reminding politicians where their real duties lie, I believe civil society here is stronger today than it was even two years ago. But it must continue to grow, for it is civil society that can hold politicians to account for their actions.

Slowly but steadily, a new economy – based on innovative and competitive ideas – is emerging and starting to produce jobs. At the same time, there has been some progress in improving public services – educators and health professionals, for example, are starting to apply international standards and techniques.

When I began my mandate, I said that I would work with the people to help move Bosnia and Herzegovina forward. Now, at the end of my mandate, I see areas where progress has been made. In almost every case it has been made by the responsible and constructive engagement of citizens. Those who engage by their actions, not by rhetoric, are the ones who are achieving practical results. I have witnessed this to a much broader degree at a municipal level.

This country needs concrete measures, not political hot air. It needs constructive dialogue to improve economic and social standards, as well as to address vital issues such as reconciliation and constitutional reform that need to be addressed. If I have a parting thought it is this: progress will only be made when politicians stop grandstanding and start listening to the opinions of others in a spirit of dialogue.

Though my mandate has come to an end, I hope to continue serving this country and its people in other ways. I wish to thank all those who have helped me understand Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex reality. Rather than taking this opportunity to bid you farewell, therefore, I would like to conclude with a respectful and affectionate *au revoir*.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling is the international community's High Representative and the European Union's Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.