

Address to Students by the Senior Deputy High Representative Peter Bas-Backer at the University of East Sarajevo



Universities, Democratic Culture and the Sensible Transfer of Sovereignty

I know that it's an abominable cliché to talk about young people being the future – but, as a matter of fact, it is very true. And it's also true that your future will be utterly unlike your parents' past. When you graduate you will take your place in a society that is dramatically different from the one that existed even a decade ago and different too from the one that existed immediately before the war.

Your challenges will be different, and the way that you address those challenges will be different.

But your ability to address those challenges will be to a great extent determined by the quality of education and training you have been given, and no one here – professors or students – will, I think, dispute the fact that the current provision of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not ideal and not sufficient to face the new challenges.

A Realistic Picture

The problems are clear enough. Just in the tertiary education sector we have severe misapplication of funds, too many students, too few teachers, and a chronic shortage of lecture space, equipment, books and specialist facilities; in many subjects course work has not been revised and upgraded for years and the latest in international research has not been incorporated. And of course, as most of you will know, because Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet been able to honour its international commitments and enact a Higher Education Law, BiH university degrees are not recognised outside BiH and non-BiH university degrees are not recognised inside BiH.

In the rest of Europe today it is common for students to complete their degree courses at more than one university – students from my country, the Netherlands, often spend a semester or two at a university in Germany or Britain or France, for example, and students from those countries spend time at our universities. However, the failure – until now – to harmonise course work in Bosnia and Herzegovina with European university standards means that students from this country do not yet have the option of completing parts of their degree studies at foreign universities.

Forgive me for beginning with a litany of shortcomings in the BiH education system – but I do not believe that you invited me here to paint a rosy and unrealistic picture of the challenges that you face.

New Dynamism and New Relevance

And I *do* believe that things are going to get better, and soon – because, after years of unnecessary delay (caused in large part by a lack of imagination among politicians and also by a lack of protest among teachers and students) we are poised to turn the corner on reforms that will give universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina a new dynamism and a new relevance.

In the next two weeks the BiH Parliament will debate a draft law on Higher Education which, if it is passed, will help to resolve many of the problems I have just listed.

The Law will place universities on a properly independent footing – the cantons in the Federation, the Entities and the State will all have an appropriate role in management and funding, and overall control of universities will be decentralised. The object is to ensure that governments do not dictate what is taught in universities and at the same time ensure that the universities adhere to sound principles of management and acceptable standards of academic integrity.

The new legislation will replace the current system, where faculties are a law unto themselves, administering degrees and study courses in ways that are neither transparent nor accountable.

The Higher Education Law will also pave the way for recognition of academic qualifications from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the rest of Europe and make it possible for students to complete part of their studies at foreign universities.

The Law is an important step towards Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfilling its obligations under the Lisbon Convention (which it signed in 2003), the Bologna Process (which it joined in the same year), and the European Partnership, the broad reform agenda designed to prepare the country for eventual EU membership.

When the Higher Education Law is passed Bosnia and Herzegovina will have opened the way for further integration in the region and in Europe, and it will join the other 45 countries across the continent that have already enacted this kind of legislation.

These countries are striving to create – by 2010 – a European Higher Education Area based on the principles of quality and

transparency, in which teachers, professors and students can move with ease, exchange experiences and knowledge and have fair recognition of their qualifications.

Democratic Culture

This common European effort also underlines the importance of higher education for the development of democratic values; it is based on the premise that diversity of culture and language, and diversity in higher education systems can be brought together in a common “democratic culture” which promotes student participation, and a critical yet creative mind-set.

This “democratic culture” is consistent with an increase in the autonomy of universities and a reduction in state intervention.

I have discussed this in some detail because I want to emphasise the point that what goes on at universities – what goes on at *this* university – and what goes on in regard to legislation *about* universities has a relevance and an importance that goes far beyond the universities themselves.

What happens here will affect the country that Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes; and it will also affect – for good or ill – Bosnia and Herzegovina’s effort to integrate fully with the rest of Europe.

The issues that are at stake go beyond, for example, whether students can study abroad, or whether your degree is recognised in other countries – they touch on how well prepared the students of Bosnia and Herzegovina are to help build a democratic society, and how well equipped this country is to contribute to the broader European community of which it wants to become a part.

Big issues will hang in the balance when Parliament debates the Higher Education Law in the coming weeks.

Questions we should be asking here today are: in what way do universities in BiH, including the University of East Sarajevo, contribute to the development of a just, democratic and prosperous society? In what way does this university contribute to Bosnia and Herzegovina's capacity to promote justice, democracy and prosperity in Europe as a whole?

I would be very interested in hearing your answers to these questions in the course of this morning's discussion.

European Standards

Now, I am working on the assumption that everyone in this room – like the vast majority of people in the country – thinks that aligning this and other universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina with European standards and values is a Good Thing (and not just because of the short-term advantages such as student mobility that it will bring.)

European standards and values have merit first and foremost because they have been shown to exercise an enormous and positive impact, over a sustained period of time, on the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

This is a point that I think tends to be lost when it comes to public discussion of Bosnia and Herzegovina's effort to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union and, further down the road, to secure full EU membership.

The exercise is often portrayed as if it were some kind of ritual in which the BiH authorities have to jump through hoops in order to satisfy the demands of bureaucrats in Brussels.

When this is a popular view it's no surprise that politicians find it easy – for reasons that they often do not feel it necessary to explain fully – to dig in their heels and announce that they will not comply with this or that requirement of the European integration process.

If it were really a matter of jumping through hoops I would say that the politicians of this country ought to dig in their heels more often. But it *isn't* a matter of jumping through hoops. It's a matter of applying in Bosnia and Herzegovina standards and values that have improved the quality of life in the European Union; it's a matter of applying standards and values that have given European citizens unparalleled levels of physical and legal security.

What are European Standards? Well, they range from transparent and free voting in elections through professional quality control of food, to rules that help maintain a dynamic and competitive market.

The object of the SAA and the European Partnership is to start delivering these kinds of benefits to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The faster this country's political leaders can enact and implement reforms the sooner people here will be able to experience positive results. (And this year the EU Council of Ministers will review the European Partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina).

In this respect I would again emphasise that the Higher Education Law is an explicit European Partnership requirement. It will bring European standards to Bosnia and Herzegovina and it will bring Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to Europe.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is Not Different

Now there is a school of thought which contends that because of its tragic experience in the early 1990s Bosnia and Herzegovina is different – it should be treated as a special case, and in consequence European standards and values should be introduced at a gentle pace.

This argument is flawed on two counts.

It is precisely *because* of the terrible trials that the people of this country had to endure in the early 1990s that BiH

citizens should be accorded the rights and freedoms that derive from European standards and values – sooner, not later. And it is a matter of historical record that the values and standards which are now embedded in the European Union are the same values and standards that helped to lift the founding member states out of the mire created by the Second World War.

European values and standards are a key to post-war recovery, not an additional challenge. They open the way to an open society based on the Rule of Law.

Some people seem to believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration project cannot succeed because of the disagreements, distrust and recrimination that are a continuing by-product of the war. Yet in 1957 the governments whose leaders signed the Treaty of Rome were struggling to keep their people fed, housed, clothed and in work. Europe was still bedevilled by the bitterness and dislocation spawned by the war. And Germany, one of the signatories of the Treaty, was under military occupation, while one of the occupying powers was a fellow signatory, France.

The circumstances then were extremely unpromising; the strategy adopted to deal with the circumstances was optimistic, pragmatic, determined and timely! (In a scarcely lit room you need a lamp). This strategy can deliver results in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I see signs of such pragmatic attitude already.

Transfer of Sovereignty

As I have mentioned, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, one of the signatories was still occupied by one of the other signatories (and, indeed, the opposite had been the case only a dozen years earlier, when France was under German occupation). These were countries that had a bitter and violent history of contending over sovereignty – yet at the very foundation of the European Union was a willingness to

transfer sovereignty. This willingness came from shrewd calculation and enlightened self-interest.

The European Union emerged from an amazingly prosaic organisation called the European Coal and Steel Community. You can't get more down to earth than coal and steel. These commodities were the mainstay of industrial society in 1950s Europe, and France and Germany recognised that joint management of production would deliver economies of scale and other advantages; at the same time they recognised that joint management of strategic resources would make it harder for the two countries to go to war.

It was not about glory, honour and national pride – it was about the wellbeing and security of millions of people. They did not transfer sovereignty lightly – they transferred it sensibly.

Since 1973, when the enlargement process began, new EU member countries have assessed that this trade-off – of elements of sovereignty in return for the greater wellbeing and security of citizens – is a beneficial one. It has involved massive social, economic and political adjustment in each country. Historically, countries that have sought membership of the EU have already been in the midst of strategic change – post-1989 Central Europe is an obvious example. The dynamics of change, as these countries dismantled a failing system and erected an alternative, have been complex and demanding, but the consequent benefits have been tangible and extensive. Just in terms of an inflow of EU development funds, Romania stands to benefit by more than 10 billion Euros in its first three years of membership, while Bulgaria will receive somewhere in the region of 4 billion Euros. And these are funds designed to facilitate reforms and initiatives (for agriculture, infrastructure, institutional capacity building, training, and so on) that will help these countries generate more funds – money to make more money.

A particularly interesting example is Ireland – a country at one end of Europe whose population size, land area and communal diversity make it remarkably comparable with Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the opposite end.

A generation ago Ireland was one of the poorest countries in Europe; today per head of population it is the second richest.

The size of Ireland's economy has nearly quadrupled in the last 20 years. Taxes have been reduced, unemployment has been slashed and foreign investment has sky-rocketed. It took a decade after Ireland joined the EU in 1973 for the dividend to start expanding rapidly, but the accession process and the post-accession influx of development funds from Brussels made it possible to set in place the nuts and bolts of an economy that could begin to compete in the global market. Significantly, Ireland is today moving from being a net recipient of EU funds to the status of a net contributor.

There is no reason why Bosnia and Herzegovina can't follow the same development trajectory – and if it does, your careers after you graduate will take place against a backdrop of economic liberalisation and growth as the country aligns itself with the most dynamic economic region on the planet.

That is a promising prospect, and the good news is that it's also a realistic one – as long as citizens hold their leaders accountable for the strategic decisions that they take, and that, in turn, is exactly why we need to see an exponential growth in the democratic culture of the universities.

Thank you