

Civic Forum in Banja Luka: Citizens in both Entities face common problems

As part of his commitment to listen to the voices of citizens and help civic society gain greater influence in the political discourse of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, yesterday convened the third Civic Forum, at the OHR Office in Banja Luka. It was the first Civic Forum to be held in Republika Srpska.

An overriding conclusion the High Representative drew from the three-hour discussion on the social problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina was that many of the problems facing citizens in the two Entities are identical; there are, too, marked similarities in the proposed solutions to these problems.

"The issues you have raised are the same as those I have heard in Sarajevo," the High Representative told his nine guests. "There is less division between the people of the two Entities than a first glance – or politicians – would suggest. This encourages me to be tougher on people who preach division."

The debate touched on the often humiliating circumstances experienced by returnees and displaced persons; implementation of the property laws; poverty and the economic and financial problems permeating every sphere of society; the lack of an investment-friendly legislative environment in BiH; corruption; the politically imposed division of BiH civic and cultural life along Entity lines; the crucial role of the media and in particular public broadcasting; the continuing dominance of ethnic issues in the BiH political system, which is still characterised by manipulation of citizens by

political parties; the continuing influence of nationalist extremists and war criminals; the significance and desired results of the implementation of the Constitutional Court's "Constituent Peoples Decision"; and the lack of enthusiasm for BiH's integration in Europe on the part of many political leaders and citizens.

Concluding the discussion, the High Representative encouraged his guests to continue fighting for their beliefs. "Modern society is about individuals, not collectives," he said. "It needs citizens who will actively participate in shaping politics and society; citizens who are trying to find common ground and work in the interest of the whole society." He promised to continue to promote the positive development of the civic sector.

Guests at the third Civic Forum were, in alphabetical order: Zekija Haznadar, a former mayor of Banja Luka; Drasko Ignjatic, the editor-in-chief of RTRS TV current affairs programming; Muharem Insanic, the conductor of the "Arion" chamber orchestra in Banja Luka; Lana Jajcevic, a lawyer from the NGO "Udruzene zene" in Banja Luka; Ljiljana Mijovic, head of the Human Rights Center in Banja Luka; Zorana Petkovic, the director of Radio "Osvit" in Zvornik; Dr. Rajko Tomas, professor of economics at the University of Banja Luka; Branko Todorovic, director of the RS Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bijeljina; and Lidija Zivanovic, director of the NGO Helsinki Citizens Assembly in Banja Luka.

The High Representative has created the Civic Forum to promote dialogue between the international community and intellectuals and representatives of civic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He plans to follow up on some of the proposals made at Civic Forum meetings with policy initiatives. The first two Civic Forum sessions took place at the High Representative's home in Sarajevo, on 11 October and 21

November. Each session has up to ten participants.
Participants change from one session to the next.