

Remarks by High Representative Valentin Inzko at an event to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day

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The Jewish Community Centre, Sarajevo, 26 January 2018

Citizens Are Protected by the Law

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are two ways of responding to an orchestrated and dangerous assault on civic values of decency and inclusiveness. One is abstract; the other is practical.

The abstract response is to articulate compelling arguments in support of consensus, and cooperation.

This is important because the barbarism that led to the Holocaust, the barbarism that has afflicted societies since the beginning of history, the barbarism that was witnessed in this country too during the 1990s – this barbarism began with words.

And in the first instance it has to be confronted by words.

Those who deal in convenient generalities – who build their political rhetoric on prejudice and insecurity – must be contradicted. They must be challenged by a counter-argument that lays out clearly the power of tolerance and the strength that comes from diversity.

The second response is practical.

Laws are in place to uphold the rights of citizens and to restrain any tendency by the powerful to steal, or to lie, or to intimidate.

Self-serving leaders will always try to circumvent the law – they will denigrate the judicial system. Unfortunately, in Bosnia and Herzegovina there is a tradition that stretches back to before the conflict, which perpetuates the cynical view that the law can always be bludgeoned or bought.

This must change.

The English humanist Thomas More, a great friend of Erasmus, was – until he fell from favour – Henry VIII's most trusted counsellor. But when it came to a choice between the king and the law, More's argument was clear: "if you scatter all the laws and the devil comes looking for you – where will you hide?"

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been forced to consider this question too often in the last one hundred years, and in this respect, I need hardly allude to the particular experience of the Jewish community, which has suffered pain and persecution amid a collapse of morality and a collapse of the law.

Yet – as though we simply will not learn from history – the public discourse continues to be tainted by damaging assumptions about power – that the powerful are free to do as they wish; that they can leverage chauvinism and ethnic mistrust without any legal consequence.

This will change when the people decide that it must change.

I hope that the people make this decision soon.

I believe that they will – because I know that there is righteousness in this society.

Yes, there are those who would perpetrate evil and those who would stand by while evil is done.

But there are many more who know the difference between right and wrong – citizens who clearly and unwaveringly see in their neighbours and compatriots not a label but a human being.

There are people who understand and value the dignity of every citizen, and who understand that this dignity can be and must be protected by the rule of law.

In the middle of the last century, my country was held in thrall by men who confused chauvinism with patriotism and considered the law a tool to be used for political ends. We know the crimes these men committed.

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina today are threatened by those who confuse intolerance with strength and conviction with intelligence.

This threat must be met.

Our task is to work with those who are building a sovereign and inclusive democracy fully integrated in the European family, so that the good prevails – and I am certain that it will.

Thank you