

Večernji list: Interview with High Representative Valentin Inzko

Interviewer: Jozo Pavković

Večernji list: Can we start with some personal questions?

Valentin Inzko: Happily, no problem.

Večernji list: When did you first come to Bosnia and Herzegovina, when to Croatia, when did you first come in contact with Croats and the Croatian culture?

Valentin Inzko: These contacts began a long time ago, somewhere in 1955 or 1956. We lived on the border with Yugoslavia. During that winter a great number of refugees, mainly Croats, who did not want to live in communism, passed through our border village. My mother being a refugee herself, the locals sent these people to us, and also because my mother spoke Croatian. The first step was always a visit to a doctor because the refugees had frostbites on their extremities after crossing the Karawanks. The second step was a visit to the gendarmerie for political asylum. Only one family were scared of the gendarmerie and my father took them to Villah (Beljak), from where they left by train for Salzburg to their relatives.

Several years later, I met my aunt Maria, an Istrian, who had married my mother's brother Janez, who had been living in Novigrad in Istria. I have three cousins from my uncle and aunt, and their daughter Ana runs the famous restaurant Three Palms in Novigrad, while her sister Jerica is the director of the museum in Novigrad. We spent our summer holidays there for some 20 years. Wonderful years! So, Croatian became my first foreign language.

The first time I met Croats in BiH was on my high school graduation trip to Mostar in 1967 and also it was the first time I met Muslims. A great event for me was also my wife Bernarda's performance at the Dubrovnik Festival and in the Vatroslav Lisinski Hall in Zagreb.

I was also deeply impressed with the hospitality of BiH Croats when I visited Međugorje for the first time, in 1982, during communism. I was not allowed to stay in Čitluk Hotel, today Brotnjo Hotel, although the hotel was empty, allegedly because I had not arranged the stay through the Protocol in Belgrade, where I was a young attaché for culture of the Austrian Embassy. So I slept in a car, and had breakfast with a good and brave family Vasilj in Međugorje. Brave, because those were still the times of the Socialist Yugoslavia. There are three generations there now, and they are all my friends.

On top of this, my father was a Slovenian minority politician in Carinthia and quite early I met Burgenland Croats in Austria with their rich cultural heritage.

Večernji list: Do you have good friends among Croats?

Valentin Inzko: I have met many. For example, many Franciscans, such as the parish priest Marinko in Međugorje and all his predecessors, Fra Iko in Mostar, who is not only building a students' hall of residence but also brotherly relations with other religions, then great parish priests in Central Bosnia. They are all fighting for spiritual wealth of Croat believers. And people like Mr Ćorluka, the owner of Violeta, fight for successful economy. I think he is a good Croat who employs one young man. Of course, this applies to other peoples, including my Austrians. We all know how many brilliant people there are in sports. Such as Čilić from Međugorje, who is now, I think, the third best in the world, then Mandžukić, then NBA stars Bogdanović and Bender... With such people, Herzegovina could become a small California. The Bosnian part of BiH has the same potentials. So much potential, so many talents in such a small area!

Večernji list: What is your comment concerning the recent war crime decisions?

Valentin Inzko: I would like to answer this question indirectly. You know that some Austrians were among the leading Nazis of the German Reich, and after the war the question was what to do. As in Germany, we in Austria also had allied forces who oversaw the trials of war criminals. At the end, about 12,600 Nazi criminals from Austria were convicted, and 40 of them were sentenced to death. I am proud of this act, and what's even more, relaxed. Because, it was war criminals who were convicted, and the Austrian people could face their future without that

burden. There are no bad peoples, only bad individuals.

There is something else important with regard to the Second World War. Germans and Israelis are good friends today, the French, Poles and other nations, victims of Nazism, are good friends with Germany today. This reconciliation process must be possible here in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I am firmly convinced that this will be the case in the end.

Večernji list: New EU Strategy is presented. Set of new conditions or reforms needed to be implemented is listed before BiH. What do you think is a priority?

Valentin Inzko: This is a question for the European Union. I would, however, like to use this opportunity to reiterate my strong support to the European integration process of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I encourage the BiH politicians to focus and compromise on issues, which are important for the EU integration in the country. BiH, together with other Western Balkan countries, has been given a historic window of opportunity to bind its future with the EU, but has to demonstrate firm and urgent determination and double its efforts to pursue this path. In addition, some sense of urgency should be injected into the whole process. Young people cannot wait longer.

Večernji list: How would you evaluate situation in BiH today comparing to one year ago but also in relation to the beginning of your mandate?

Valentin Inzko: When I took up the position of the High Representative, the political environment was different than today. When my mandate first started, nationalistic tendencies and rhetoric had been contained by a robust and decisive International Community to push back on divisive policies and rhetoric.

In the meantime, however, some BiH politicians, unfortunately, failed to take the opportunity offered to them by the International Community and advance the necessary reforms and bring the country closer to the European Union through local ownership. In all these years there was too much focus on negative agenda and too little on forward-looking agenda. As a consequence, BiH is in many respects lagging behind the rest of the region, which is unfortunate.

I believe it is high time the politicians start really focusing on issues, which matter to the citizens of BiH – on economy and the rule of law. Words will not be enough. They need to start compromising on very concrete issues and leave their personal and nationalistic agendas behind.

The EU has presented a clear strategy for this country and is ready to continue giving BiH a helping hand. I hope BiH will take it and do its job.

At the same, I want to encourage the BiH politicians to find a sound compromise on the Electoral Reform, so the election results can be implemented smoothly. BiH cannot afford another crisis.

Večernji list: International community is again active in mediation to find a solution for disputed issues in BiH. This time it is about the changes to the Election Law. Do you expect the agreement?

Valentin Inzko: The EU and the US are leading the process from the side of the international community, working very hard to encourage the BiH political parties to find a compromise solution on the Electoral Reform issues. Whether these efforts will bring results depends on the BiH political parties, which need to reach a compromise.

Večernji list: What if there is no positive outcome, what if election result could not be implemented? Will you intervene and how?

Valentin Inzko: No one should expect the OHR to resolve this issue with the Bonn powers. It is the job of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly and the parties in the assembly.

Holding the 2018 elections is a must, democracy is inconceivable without elections. The rights of citizens to vote and to be voted and to hold those currently elected accountable must be ensured.

I therefore urge political leaders to take the necessary steps to enable the smooth conduct and implementation of the results of the 2018 General Elections. The 1 December 2016 ("Ljubic case") decision of the BiH Constitutional Court, which above all concerns the elections to the Federation House of Peoples, must be implemented.

As far as the OHR is concerned, at this stage we are ready to technically support the process, which is led by the EU and the US.

Večernji list: Issue of Mostar is still open. OHR has made its position clear about this but no progress is made. How to resolve this issue even especially as you warned about it so many times?

Valentin Inzko: The dynamic with the Mostar issue is similar to the one of the Election law. The system then in place with regard to Mostar and the Election law has been challenged by one political party, same in both cases, in front of the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court put then solutions regarding Mostar and the Election Law out of force and now the political parties avoid a compromise for very long time.

Instead of reaching a compromise, some blame the OHR and other parties appeal to the OHR to resolve the issue.

The problem is therefore in the lack of willingness of the political parties to compromise and reach a solution.

Večernji list: Election campaign in BiH is already ongoing. National but also social rhetoric is sharp. Do you see any credible threat to security situation coming out of such rhetoric?

Valentin Inzko: The political rhetoric is becoming increasingly irresponsible over the years, and has indeed escalated in recent weeks. It is irresponsible for some politicians to raise tensions and fear over unrealistic issues, simply in order to secure their own positions. Instead of focusing on unrealistic ideas which generate additional conflict and further division, political actors should look for other ways to ensure equality of all peoples and citizens throughout the country so that everyone could feel at home and comfortable.

Politicians should focus on issues they can actually deliver – like reforms that would create jobs, better health-care and other public services, better roads, education, etc. This is what responsible politicians really care about.

Večernji list: BiH stagnates or moves slowly down the EU path. New EU enlargement strategy is disappointing for many in BiH because full membership seems distant and insecure goal. How do you see chances of BiH to become part of the EU?

Valentin Inzko: BiH will be an EU member, no doubt about that. But the question is when? Your question is very interesting as it entails certain logic, which is very typical for BiH. Namely, it appears that if something is difficult or distant, people in this country many times tend to give up. It should be the opposite, the political and institutional leaders, the administration at different levels and the entire society should feel motivated to do the job as well as possible and as early as possible, so that they can become members of the EU.

I can tell you from my own experience that the EU integration is not an easy journey. It is hard work, which demands commitment to compromise on difficult and complicated issues. It took Austria seven years, Spain nine years. But once you get to the finish line, your country is changed and reformed to the better. And this is maybe what some politicians are afraid of, because the issues they capitalise on now will then become irrelevant. They will become irrelevant. However, BiH must do this because of itself, not because of Bruxelles. Then it will be easy to join the European family.

Večernji list: Could enlargement stoppage lead to increase of euroskepticism and entrance of some other non-european influences into this area? Activities of Russia, China and Turkey are obvious.

Valentin Inzko: In all relevant polls, citizens overwhelmingly support the EU future of this country. When accession process picks up the pace and concrete steps start happening I am sure that this percentage will sustain and even increase.

Citizens are smart and they know what is viable and what is good for themselves and their children. No political force in BiH has expressed opposition to the accession process, so elected officials need to recognize what the citizens already know and start delivering on their promises.

As the accession process advances I am sure that it will be barely any space left for anything or anyone but for the EU idea and what and the values it brings.

Večernji list: Do you see BiH before in NATO, then in EU?

Valentin Inzko: In the Baltic countries and elsewhere NATO came first. But whatever I would say, it would be speculation. The pace of Euro-Atlantic integration of BiH depends on the BiH's ability to fulfil the necessary criteria.

Večernji list: If you are instead of the politicians how you would arrange BiH so everyone feels content and equal...?

Valentin Inzko: I would support generosity as a principle, in addition to constitutional rights. I would focus on making the necessary reforms, which would bring more investments, jobs, better schools, highways and roads, public transportations etc. I would increase the standards in the rule of law area and fight corruption. I would improve welfare state and so on. I think this would make people content and would improve the sense that they are equal with now partly privileged political elite.

Večernji list: Does BiH need more OHR? Many BiH politicians claim that there is no such need while on the other side international community does not think that way. What is your view?

Valentin Inzko: The mandate of the HR remains unchanged. The closure of the OHR depends on whether the 5+2 agenda has been implemented. It is difficult to expect serious consideration of OHR leaving, as long as some political actors advocate for destabilizing goals. But it is not up to me. The PIC has to decide. In any case, my wife would be happy to have me more at home.