

Keynote Speech by HR Valentin Inzko at the Conference on Dialogue and Reconciliation Organized by the Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law

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A Platform for Dialogue

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of today's conference. There is no question that Bosnia and Herzegovina today needs space for dialogue and reconciliation – and every effort to create and sustain that space deserves support.

There are representatives here from politics and civil society and from the International Community. I know that the people in this room are open-minded, constructive, forward-looking, and committed to building a society that is inclusive and secure.

And that – if you will forgive me for saying so – is the problem.

Because for dialogue and reconciliation to work you need all sides. You need people whose minds are not open; you need people who are bitter, people who have not yet been able to break free from fear or even from hatred.

Dialogue involves different – often completely opposite – viewpoints.

Reconciliation involves the restoration of understanding and empathy between people who have caused one another harm – or who are, at least, *believed* to have caused one another.

So, the first point I would make today is that we need a room that is at least three times as big, because we need to have about three times as many people!

This is necessary in order to have the sort of challenging – and perhaps painful – dialogue that can lead to deep and lasting reconciliation.

I have served for more than a decade as the International Community's High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina – I know how hard it is to close some of the distances that still separate communities and individuals in this country.

But let me say from the outset that I believe this is possible.

Let me also say that without this work, without developing and sustaining a platform for dialogue and reconciliation, other efforts – political, diplomatic and economic – will be frustrated.

So, again, let me congratulate and thank the Max Planck Foundation for this initiative.

Stakeholders

I said that having a roomful of good people is only half the solution. Let me be more specific.

The people I would like to see at today's meeting (along with all of you!) are those who – in one way or another – are inclined to look to the past. I'm speaking about those, for example, who still fall back on the nationalist rhetoric that produced the conflict, those who have not yet embraced the idea of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a common home for all its people, those who are simply unable to trust, unable to have confidence in the country and its people.

We need them to be here.

We need to talk to them and we need to listen to them.

There's a wise piece of advice to people who are battling feelings of insecurity and resentment: "Don't compare your inside to their outside".

It's easy to dismiss the unhelpful posturing of others, but if we glimpsed the fear and anxiety that may be making them act the way they do, that may be making them say the things they say – it is just possible that they will seem more deserving of our help than our condemnation.

This is the beginning of the road to dialogue.

Non-toxic dialogue

How do we ensure a dialogue that is constructive rather than toxic?

One underlying principle might be to accept that people with unhelpful views often do not realise how unhelpful those views may be.

When someone begins a racist diatribe by saying "I'm not a racist but . . ." or "I've nothing against them as individuals, but . . ." it's important to remember that this person probably believes their own disclaimer – they do not see themselves as intolerant or antisocial and they do not want to be seen as such.

That's a basis for exploring prejudice and for beginning to deconstruct some of the chauvinist views that have continued to impede progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the conflict.

And by the same token, we should look critically at our own views – no matter how tolerant and inclusive they may be. Are we insensitive to people's genuine concerns about their security or their identity?

Dialogue isn't based on *accepting* the other person's point of view; it's based on *recognising* that point of view and trying to understand where it comes from.

Without this dialogue, there won't be reconciliation – the reconciliation that this country needs if it is to move forward.

One way of encouraging such dialogue – and I am proposing this to the Max Planck Foundation and to some of the other foundations and organizations that are represented here today – would be to organise meetings in villages and towns around the country and invite young people and businesspeople and workers and veterans and families of the missing and so on – and make a point of including people who have *not* until now shown much support for dialogue. Those are the people who have to be brought into the tent.

Point for Discussion

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina do not need to be taught about dialogue and reconciliation. They could teach the rest of Europe a thing or two about how to do this.

But what they do need is space.

And this is what we can provide.

We can provide a platform for dialogue.

I would propose just one underlying point for discussion, and it is this: What needs to change for me to view my neighbour in a different way?

When it comes to answering this question, I can speak for myself. But I can't speak for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And nor can anyone in this room.

And nor can any leader of any political party.

The people who can answer this question aren't here. They aren't in the International Community. They aren't in parliament.

They are in towns and villages across the country, and they aren't often asked this question.

What if the answers are negative? What if the answers are destructive?

They won't be.

I have been the High Representative almost as long as all of my predecessors put together. I have been closely engaged with this country for more than 20 years. Even as a young man, as part of the Slovenian community in Austria, I was keenly aware of the nuances and intricacies of developments in this part of Southeast Europe.

Of one thing I am absolutely certain – there is more good in this country than evil.

There is more goodwill than ill will.

There is a genuine and lasting hunger for dialogue and reconciliation and it is not being served by the existing public platforms.

We need a new platform that will let dialogue and reconciliation into the light.

Models of Dialogue

We do not have to start from scratch. In the postwar period, there have been extraordinary models – courageous individuals and groups of individuals who have rejected hatred, who have rejected spite.

Among the most awe-inspiring are the Mothers of Srebrenica. They took the brave decision to meet with mothers from the other side in the conflict – to make common cause in the effort to account for the missing. The participants in that dialogue will tell you how tentative and difficult it was at the beginning.

But the human spirit has a capacity to liberate itself from fear and hatred.

This is not a fairy tale. It is a story built on a firm foundation of common sense and prudence.

As Munira Subasic of the Mothers of Srebrenica often says, survivors do not have the right to forgive on behalf of victims – rather, they have a commitment to truth and to justice and they have an obligation to prevent hatred from seeping from one generation to the next.

In the final passages of Alan Paton's 1948 novel about South Africa, *Cry the Beloved Country*, there is an encounter between a white farmer whose son has been murdered, and a black village elder whose son is to be hanged for the murder. The farmer explains that he has arranged for milk to be delivered to children in the village and the elder explains that the villagers are praying for the farmer and his family. These are small gestures, but they are of incalculable importance: they are affirmations of what is positive in every citizen and in every society. They testify to the power of good.

Small steps take the human heart a very long way.

Many years ago, I met a man whose father had been denounced by a neighbour during the Spanish Civil War and had been sent to prison because of this. After the war, my friend's father came home, and he and his neighbour lived side by side for the next 30 years. I asked what that was like. Well, my friend told me, when they met in the street, they would greet one another – Good Morning or Good Evening – and they never exchanged a word beyond that. Somehow, he added, it was enough. That greeting meant that they could continue with their lives without carrying the weight of the past. It was as if this very simple and basic courtesy was the opening to a kind of reconciliation.

Political Developments

Now, it will rightly be asked. How can we expect citizens in this country to engage in constructive dialogue when their elected representatives do not set a positive example?

Well – as I often point out – although party leaders make a public show of being deaf to the interests of all but their own community, they are often more constructive in private. This, of course, isn't much of a defence, and the truth is that many of this country's leaders have talked a lot – often in a decidedly *unconstructive* way – and delivered little. As I was obliged to report to the Security Council last month, some leaders are actively working to obstruct measures that would make it possible to complete Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic integration and are trying to undo some of the essential achievements of the postwar period. Currently, the prospects of making progress in the strategic areas identified in the Opinion of the European Commission are not good.

But – and this is very important: it cannot be repeated often enough – Bosnia and Herzegovina is not its leaders. Bosnia and Herzegovina is its people.

And its people are extraordinary.

A Platform for Dialogue

That extraordinary character is reflected in the work of writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers who have produced some of the most vibrant, challenging and universally relevant work to come out of Europe in the last hundred years. And this cultural heritage doesn't celebrate chauvinism: it celebrates an inclusive and progressive view of the world.

Part of that view involves an ability to see possibilities in the most unpromising of circumstances – this is the Bosnian way.

I believe that a new – or renewed – platform for dialogue can allow this native genius to flourish. Reconciliation addresses open wounds. It addresses hatred and bitterness. This is not easy but it is necessary and I believe we can maintain a platform on which this difficult but necessary dialogue can take place. This will be an important step forward on the long path to deep and lasting reconciliation.

A central part of my mandate as the High Representative is to support the rule of law. This is central to postwar recovery – and, indeed, it is often said that if you take care of justice, then peace will take care of itself. There is truth in this. We cannot simply talk up the benefits of reconciliation and encourage people to forgive. Dialogue and reconciliation will only be achieved if there is overarching protection – if citizens begin to have confidence that they are protected by the law.

And today in Bosnia and Herzegovina the right of citizens to live in dignity, to have employment opportunities that reward hard work and honesty and that provide families with a decent way of life – this fundamental right is being denied. As long as this is the case, reconciliation will be elusive.

This is where the International Community can play a necessary and effective role.

The International Community can and will ensure that the Dayton Peace Agreement is implemented in its entirety and that those who seek to transform resentment and anxiety into a political program are prevented from doing so.

The International Community will continue to work with BiH partners who want to fight crime and corruption and build a society that is secure and prosperous.

We can protect the space in which authentic dialogue takes place – dialogue that acknowledges fear and anxiety but does not give into them; dialogue that embraces different points of view but at the same time reflects the genius of this society to sustain cooperation and see possibilities in often unpromising circumstances.

We can and will ensure there is a platform for this dialogue. The dialogue itself will remain in the capable hands of BiH citizens. They know how to speak to one another in their own way. They hold the key to reconciliation.

I have no doubt whatsoever that in the long run the people of this country will overcome the difficulties and differences so often highlighted by their leaders, and achieve the deep and lasting reconciliation that most citizens want and every single one of them is entitled to.

Thank you.