

Klix.ba: Interview with High Representative Valentin Inzko

By Dino Bezdrob

Klix.ba: You have given the leadership and caucuses in the RS National Assembly until April to withdraw the decorations awarded earlier to war criminals. What will happen if the RSNA fails to do so within the given deadline - who should face consequences and what should those consequences be? If you issue an ultimatum, surely there is also a tool you are “threatening” with.

Valentin Inzko: The three-month deadline was set because the next session of the UN Security Council will take place at the beginning of May. But it is more important to give the RS political elite an opportunity to think about what kind of future and social framework they are leaving to the younger generations in Republika Srpska.

This move is an attempt from my side to incentivize the RS authorities, namely the RS National Assembly, to create a better, happier future for all, a future unburdened with baggage from the past.

A quarter of a century after the war, we are still witnessing squabbles about historical facts and a cacophony of accompanying divisive narratives. To put it simply, a situation like this prevents reconciliation and trust-building. Consequently, society is not making progress in dealing with the past. All this generates frustration, consumes energy, diverts focus from forward-looking agendas and drives young people out of the country at an accelerated pace. And even though they are not directly related, it should be noted that such attitudes are not conducive for investments.

Right now, it is not the time for “what if” scenarios, and I do not wish to talk about sanctions. It is only February and there is plenty of time left for the RSNA to resolve this issue. I want to give them time and space to do it. I expect a mature and responsible approach from all party leaders in the RS. It is their move now.

Klix.ba: We can safely say that you have become more active at a time when you are expected to leave the position of the High Representative. First it was the removal of the name plaque from the student dorm in Pale, and now this demand for the RSNA. What happened, and why have you waited for so many years to take steps that are concrete and visible to the citizens?

Valentin Inzko: We have had two phases since Dayton, one marked by the robust intervention of the international community, and the second phase in which we expected “domestic ownership” to take the full responsibility for the country.

Because the second phase has not yielded the results we had hoped for, now we are entering a third phase which, I believe, should combine the elements of the previous two. This phase is going to be more active and energetic in moving this country forward. Domestic politicians will need to keep up and be more active and responsible.

Therefore, to answer your question, nothing new has happened. As I had been advocating for a long time, this is the materialization of the international community’s intention to change its approach towards peace implementation and the overall political developments in BiH. It is a very good development for this country, and I wholeheartedly welcome it.

However, just as a reminder, I first asked Milorad Dodik to remove the plaque dedicated to Radovan Karadžić in Pale a year ago, last May, and there was no mention then of the nomination of German MP Christian Schmidt for the position of the High Representative. It was also not known on July 11, when I demanded the same thing on the day of the Srebrenica commemoration. I made the same request for a third time in November 2020 in the Security Council, but this time with a deadline.

Klix.ba: You mentioned last November. The talk about you leaving the OHR came after strong international support you received at the forum within the UNSC, when you were fiercely attacked by BiH Presidency Chairman Milorad Dodik. What changed overnight so that you are now leaving, and Christian Schmidt from Germany is expected to take your place?

Valentin Inzko: For years I have been visiting capitals asking for something to change. For example, to me, it is

difficult to understand why some large European countries do not have a single soldier in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while a South American country, Chile, has 20. Or why President Vladimir Putin, who has clear political objectives, has received Milorad Dodik ten times, while some Western leaders have not had any time for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Of course, for 12 years I have also been warning the Security Council that peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not perfect and that it should be perfected. In this sense, I am pleased there was finally some response and that Germany has expressed interest in this position. Perhaps in Berlin, they are viewing Angela Merkel's last year and Joseph Biden's first year as a good moment to open a new chapter in BiH. I would agree.

Whatever change occurs, Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to seize it. This is the last chance as there are still people who remember Dayton and who know where Bosnia and Herzegovina is. One of them, of course, is the new US President. There are new hotspots in the world emerging, and some of them are much bigger than BiH.

Also, as I said before, names and individuals are not that important. The focus should be on policies and the overall understanding of the international community that things must change. At the end of the day, what matters is that international commitment has been reinvigorated and I hope BiH's political leaders will recognize the moment and live up to it.

Klix.ba: Are we seeing new winds blowing from the west over this region, specifically BiH, and should we expect a stronger approach of the EU and the USA, perhaps a sort of "clean-up"?

Valentin Inzko: I am convinced that President Joe Biden will, in cooperation with other members of the PIC Steering Board, bring a new dynamic and a breath of fresh air that will help turn a new page both in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also in the region.

This is all very promising for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only if BiH politicians recognize the importance of this moment and do their part. There is no place for narrow-minded, zero-sum politics if they want to work in the best interest of this country and its citizens.

Klix.ba: Do you regret not having undertaken more decisive and radical steps on the BiH political scene, despite the fact that there must have been room and substance to do so?

Valentin Inzko: Philosophically, you can always say that more could have been done. You are right. However, you should not forget that, when I arrived here, I was given a piece of paper with 5 points (state and military property, rule of law, fiscal stability, and Brčko) and two conditions for closing the Office of the High Representative. And an instruction to do it as soon as possible.

So, there was not enough support for "radical moves;" we were in the domestic ownership phase and my office kept getting smaller year after year. At the same time there was a strengthening of the EU's office, and rightly so, as this is the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, these were my circumstances, and I did as much as was possible. Everything was done within the parameters of my mandate, and my mandate reflected international support. The guiding principle for me was always to work for the benefit of this country and all its people.

Klix.ba: Have you spoken with the High Representative candidate Christian Schmidt and what messages and experience have you passed on to him; is he going to have the support for the use of famed Bonn Powers?

Valentin Inzko: Yes, we have been in contact. We have had our first meeting, but I will not go into details. However, I will tell him that domestic politicians should only be observed through the prism of their performance, their results.

I will tell him that BiH is the only European country that has given Europe a member of the House of Lords in London, a Deputy Energy Minister in Norway, an Education Minister in Sweden, and a Justice Minister in Austria. There are, of course, many other successful Bosnians and Herzegovinians across the world. Finally, one should not forget that BiH was the only one in former Yugoslavia to produce two Nobel Prize winners. There is no other country like BiH.

If my successor manages to harness all the talent of this country, including the diaspora, then the sky is the limit for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

You will allow me to leave it up to my successor to talk about his priorities, once he arrives.