

Op-ed by High Representative: The will of the voters at the elections must be respected

As High Representative, my wish for October 2nd is to see the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina empowered. Election Day should be the pinnacle of a vibrant democracy. Elections belong to the people, not political parties; it is the citizens who exercise their fundamental right to determine who will govern them.

This fundamental process must occur seamlessly. Earlier this year, I enacted the measures ensuring the financing and transparency of the October elections, simply because no state budget was agreed in the Council of Ministers. Only after my decision it was possible for elections to take place on time. The Central Electoral Commission was able to order and pay for the ballot paper so that people can vote and other requirements. My introduction of the integrity package strengthens the integrity and transparency of correct and fair elections. Those who seek to impede free and fair elections by undermining voters' freedom to choose will face immediate and forceful penalties. To those who aim to put illegal influence or pressure on voters or their families, I say the following: Fraud and coercion is not only a criminal offense, but can be seen as anti-Dayton behavior which will not be tolerated.

Local authorities have also failed to come together and assume responsibility for electoral and constitutional reforms. They have not agreed on an approach for amending the state constitution to align with the European Court of Human Rights judgments. These judgments determined there should be guaranteed rights for citizens who do not identify as one of the three constituent peoples (Others and minorities like Jews and Roma). Everybody in this country has equal rights. Passive and active election rights cannot discriminate against either for the three constituent peoples, or for the Others, who have suffered from inequality up to now.

I share the frustration and exasperation of many citizens dissatisfied with this lack of progress. As High Representative, my mandate is to protect and oversee the implementation of the General Framework Agreement for Peace, often referred to as the Dayton Agreement. The Dayton Agreement is a unique peace accord because it contains the country's constitution. As the High Representative, I cannot change the Dayton Agreement or amend the state-level constitution. Only the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, elected by the citizens of this country, can amend the constitution, in line with the European Court of Human Rights decisions. These decisions include Sejdić-Finci, Zornić, and other similar judgments. I stand prepared to help those calling for swift implementation of these decisions by the responsible authorities. It is deplorable that BiH citizens have waited over a decade for these sorely needed revisions, which are critical for European integration. Decisive action must be taken to defend human rights and mutual respect. I will contribute what is within my competences.

Some politicians have barely addressed these issues almost two weeks into the electoral campaign. Leaders must provide citizens with a clear way out of the current political deadlock. Most critically, they must show their democratic responsibility for forming a government or becoming a constructive opposition after votes are counted in early October. Since the last general election in 2018, the Federation Presidency and Government have operated under a "technical mandate" because political parties blocked the formation of institutions. Blocking institutions has only served narrow party interests to the detriment of the people. And the institute of the vital national interest earns respect and preserves the identity of people as part of the whole. It is too serious to be misused as a playing field for political games.

This cannot continue after the October election, and I will monitor this closely and act if necessary in the right time.

I have received some ideas from political parties, and I am thankful for them – but much remains to be done. Our common goal has to be keeping multiethnicity and identity as laid out in the Dayton Agreement in a good balance. We have to develop an improved situation with a view on the society in this country as it is today one generation after the catastrophe. This will lead to European standards. BiH as a state of a few million should become a recognizable part of the 450-million EU population.

Some politicians use their platforms to speculate whether I will dissolve the blockades that prevent the institutions of the state, entities, cantons, and municipalities from functioning. They should know that I will execute my mandate if necessary.

Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina deserve to understand how their leaders plan to confront the country's many

challenges. There must be clear messaging on how to fight corruption and nepotism, ensure the rule of law, and progress toward EU candidate status, including meeting commitments made to EU Council President Charles Michel in June. Across Europe, problems multiply as Russia's war in Ukraine drags on. How will legislators of this country address soaring gas and energy prices or combat inflation? Are these issues included in campaign messaging?

When I talk to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they all express the same wishes for their country: advancing economic and social prosperity, strengthening the rule of law, and creating a better country for their children. Addressing these issues creates a better future for all of Bosnia and Herzegovina instead of maintaining the status quo for the benefit of the few.

Bosnia and Herzegovina must see the end of backward-looking politics, finger-pointing, and personal attacks. This behavior is futile; the consequences are political instability, economic decline, and social decay that drive the exodus from this country, particularly of young people. Reengaging this country's talented youth and enabling their political participation is essential. I will advocate better possibilities of participation for all individuals or groups. Young people especially deserve more integration in public decisions and I expect political decision-makers to act in respect of this. You have to offer more to the young people to keep them in this country.

First and foremost, the basic tenant of democracy should be upheld: the government on all levels must be formed rapidly after the elections on October 2nd based on the will of the voters.

As High Representative, I will make sure that citizens' votes count. I am committed to fulfilling my mandate: restoring and protecting the functionality of the state. Senseless blocking must end. This dangerous downward trajectory must be reversed and court decisions, be they domestic or European, have to be respected and transformed into good legislation. Bosnia and Herzegovina must be steered back on the path to prosperity, as its citizens deserve.