

IBNA: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Mladen Dragojlović

IBNA: Mr. Inzko, you are in BiH long enough to compare the situation at the time of your arrival with today. Which changes in the country are most obvious in this period?

Valentin Inzko: I first came to BiH shortly after the war ended. In 1996, I was appointed as the first Austrian resident Ambassador to the country and I stayed in that function until 1999. Of course, I continued to follow the events in the country when I moved to Vienna to head the Austrian Foreign Ministry department responsible for Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. I returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2009 as High Representative.

Quite a lot has changed since my first arrival to the country. Huge progress has been made. The physical traces of war have largely disappeared in larger towns and cities, however, you still see frequent reminders of it when you travel around the country, in Derventa for instance. I am glad to see that many cities are moving beyond reconstruction and we are seeing construction of new facilities that did not exist before the war.

Much has happened in other spheres over the last twenty year, and BiH now aspires to become a member of the European Union. The progress made in the last ten years has been too little and too slow and my colleagues and I from the international community would like to see a return to the reform dynamic we had for instance between 2002 and 2005. Let us be clear, that period tells us that when there is political will in this country significant progress can be made.

I believe that most citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina would agree that many of the reforms undertaken in the first ten years after the war were impressive. Just to give you a few examples: the vast majority of people who fled their homes were eventually able to regain ownership and possession of their pre-war property. Some other reforms undertaken improved the lives of BiH citizens to a great extent: a single, stable BiH currency was created to facilitate the free movement of goods, common license plates have enabled the free movement and reintegration of people, single ID cards and modern passports, central to BiH citizens being able to travel visa-free in the European Union, a modern Value Added Tax system was created and it achieved hugely impressive results in filling public coffers. Without this, the fiscal situation in this country would probably be untenable. The list of course goes on and on.

However, it seems that over the last decade, domestic politicians have lost their way, and are failing to build on the accomplishments of that first decade after the war. In so doing, they have alienated themselves from the people whom they claim to represent. People around the country, no matter where you are, in Trebinje or Buzim, in Prozor or in Prijedor, want the same things – safety, security, jobs, health insurance. Most of all, they want their children to stay here, yet at this moment, the advice parents most often give their children is to finish the school and leave. That may be the most painful, most serious message and politicians have to hear it, not turn a deaf ear as they have been doing for some quite time. In short, the way politicians in this country work has to change, as that is the only way to move forward. That is the only way to make this country work. Luckily they have a chance to improve their score card by delivering concrete results now.

The international community's and EU dedication to BiH has been confirmed over and over again, most recently at the Western Balkans Summit in Vienna. We are here to help those who are ready to help themselves and we are equally ready to stand up to those politicians who challenge the Peace Agreement and the stability of the country.

Twenty years after the end of the war, it is time to move decisively towards the goal people in BiH want: European Union membership and the prosperity and standard of living it has brought to so many other Europeans.

IBNA: Recently you said that “the announced RS referendum (on judiciary system in BiH) is an extremely serious matter”. What consequences can it have for the citizens in BiH? Do you, as High representative have a mechanism to ban this referendum?

Valentin Inzko: The proposed referendum represents a direct and serious violation of the Peace Agreement. It is irresponsible and highly damaging that after close to two decades we continue to see such challenges to the Peace

Agreement.

There is absolutely no doubt that the RS National Assembly adopted a decision that goes beyond its competencies, despite being clearly warned in advance by the International Community not to do so. Voting against essential parts of the General Framework Agreement for Peace is irresponsible to say the least and can cause no good. Quite the opposite, it can only drive the RS into deeper isolation and the whole country into an even deeper crisis and nobody needs that. One half of the country cannot vote for the country as a whole.

As the High Representative, I still retain the necessary instruments to uphold the GFAP. PIC Steering Board Ambassadors have also been clear on this issue. Rest assured we are fully aware of the gravity of this situation.

There are legal avenues within the domestic system to improve the efficiency of the judiciary at all levels. That is the proper way to address these kinds of issues. The State-level judiciary is regulated at the State-level and this is where improvements should be made. What is clear is that we must be strengthening the judiciary at all levels and not weakening it.

IBNA: What do political leaders in BiH have to do to ensure a better future for the country? What is the most important issue in the political life of the State?

Valentin Inzko: The message to them is very simple and very clear: they have to start delivering the concrete results that they have signed up to support under the Written Commitment and the reform agenda. This would be a good start to repair the damage of the last ten years, which has led to so many people leaving the country to build their futures abroad. BiH cannot afford this and must act now to offer its people a future here and now.

Ordinary people of this country are dissatisfied with the way their political representatives behave. They almost never address the basic and very serious problems ordinary people face on a daily basis. People live in present time, they are tired of waiting for the “better future” to start, they want better life now and their elected leaders have to provide it. We must see results now.

The clear interest of the people is to get the economy going, to open up new jobs, and to move ahead on the Euro-Atlantic path. Political representatives owe this to the citizens since they have failed to deliver meaningful progress over the last nine years. The International Community is ready to support this Reform Agenda as our common vision remains a re-integrated, functional and prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state which works in the interests of its citizens and is a fully integrated member of the Euro-Atlantic family.

Politicians have to change the way they conduct politics – dialogue and a readiness to reach healthy compromises is the key to the country can get through some big challenges and become a better place.

IBNA: Since you came in BiH SNSD, president Milorad Dodik has been demanding the closure of OHR. But, there are certain conditions for that and they are still not fulfilled. How is that process going and when will OHR be closed?

Valentin Inzko: The decision on the closure of OHR will be made by the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council and not by Milorad Dodik or any other BiH politician.

As you know, back in 2008, the PIC SB has set a list of objectives and conditions, usually known as “5+2”, that need to be met in order for OHR to close.

Since then, the PIC SB has regularly reviewed progress achieved on this “5+2” agenda. Progress has been made in some areas, while a chronic disagreement among the main political parties has produced gridlock that has prevented the full implementation of the agenda.

Until all the objectives and conditions are met, the OHR will remain in Bosnia and Herzegovina, not a day shorter or longer.

Let me say the obvious, the more you challenge the Peace Agreement the longer the OHR will have to stay. In short, those who challenge the Peace Agreement have the greatest responsibility for the OHR to still be necessary.

IBNA: A certain number of politicians in Sarajevo, since the end of war, are saying that the Republic of Srpska is established on genocide and must be abolished. Is this possible to happen without a new

war?

Valentin Inzko: Anyone who tries to deny or ignore the existence of the entities as they were created by the Dayton Peace Agreement is wasting their time, but I must say that such calls have been few and far between for quite some time. What we instead see are repeated statements, in particular from the RS President, calling for secession.

As for the change of the BiH Constitution, the Constitution itself is clear. It explains how it can be amended. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina it can be changed through a vote in the BiH Parliamentary Assembly. So let me be clear: the Constitution cannot be changed unilaterally by either the Republika Srpska or the Federation BiH and politicians should stop frightening citizens with baseless stories about them being under threat from other ethnic groups. The biggest danger to the people of this country is a political class that decides that they will continue to conduct politics in a way that has brought this country to a very low point and where ordinary citizens from every corner of this country are paying the price.

So let's put the past behind us, look decisively forwards and work together to deliver a better future for all.

Now is the time to show the leadership to turn decisively to the future.