Op-ed by the High Representative on the 20th Anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement

As the 20th Anniversary of the Peace Agreement approaches, one thing on which we can all agree is that it brought desperately needed peace to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina We should never forget that. Peace is a priceless commodity and it should never be taken for granted. But it is the base, not the end state.

Our shared vision is a functional and prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina: a state working in the interests of its citizens, as a fully integrated member of the Euro-Atlantic family. That is a vision we remain committed to realising, but to do so we must once again get serious.

I also believe that most citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina would agree that many of the reforms undertaken to implement the Peace Agreement in the first ten years after the war – to reintegrate the country and its peoples and to build the institutions to serve them – were impressive. And let me be clear, when I say reintegration or functionality, that, of course, does not mean centralisation.

For example, the vast majority of people who fled their homes were eventually able to regain ownership and possession of their pre-war property. True, overall rates of return were disappointing, and much remains to be done before we can say that the authorities throughout the country have created the conditions to fully welcome returnees. Nevertheless, Annex 7 of the Peace Agreement provided the framework for people to have their property restored to them and, with sufficient political will, much more can be achieved.

Other reforms undertaken to implement the Peace Agreement

similarly brought a measure of improvement to people's lives: the creation of a single, stable BiH currency to facilitate the free movement of goods; common license plates to facilitate the free movement and reintegration of people; single ID cards and modern passports, central to Bosnians being able to travel visa-free in the European Union; a modern Value Added Tax system that shows impressive results in filling the public coffers. The list goes on and on.

My point in listing these improvements is not to say that Dayton is perfect. It is not. Nor is it to say that this country is currently doing as well as it could. It clearly is not.

My point is that during the first ten years, when there was sufficient political will and a readiness to reach healthy compromises, the Dayton Framework allowed the country to make progress.

So it simply is not credible for today's politicians to point to the Dayton Agreement or its implementation to justify their long-running failure to deliver the changes the country and its citizens so desperately need. With the country in the grips of endemic corruption and young people in particular suffering brutally high levels of unemployment, it is clear that the approach of political leaders during the last ten years has been disastrous for ordinary people.

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It is difficult to avoid the impression that the political class has lost all contact with the problems ordinary people face. This disconnect is reflected the political discourse, which almost never addresses the basic and very serious problems facing ordinary people. Solutions for unemployment, corruption and crumbling services are almost never addressed. Instead we must listen to the never-ending obsession with the "letter" of Dayton or the "original" Dayton.

Twenty years after the Peace Agreement, it is time to look decisively to the future and to focus our efforts on building

a better future, especially for the young many of whom were not even born when the Peace Agreement was signed.

It has become a regular occurrence in daily politics for party representatives on all sides to focus on those elements of the Agreement which suit their short-term political goals and which serve as a means to divert public attention from the real problems facing the country.

Even worse we continue to see attempts to blatantly misinterpret and/or violate the Peace Agreement, including the BiH Constitution. For example, according to the letter of Annex 4 of the Peace Agreement, the BiH Constitution, the sovereign state of Bosnia and Herzegovina had its "internal structure modified" in 1995 establishing the two entities, the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska.

So anyone who tries to deny or ignore the existence of the entities as they were created by the Dayton Peace Agreement is wasting time. My answer to them is: "Read the Peace Agreement".

Similarly, anyone who tries claim that the entities have sovereignty or statehood under Dayton or may secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina is also denying the letter of the Peace Agreement.

Another example where politicians have misrepresented the letter of Dayton is the state-level judicial institutions. Some parties even claim that the BiH state has no authority in the judicial sphere and that the entities can unilaterally opt out of the state judicial sphere.

This is also not the case. The state, the Republika Srpska, a municipality, or any other level of government can only decide on a matter falling under its competency. And the BiH Constitution is clear that the state, among other responsibilities, has exclusive constitutional responsibility for inter-entity and international criminal law enforcement, not the entities. So instead of undermining institutions that are there to fight corruption we need to be strengthening them

at all levels. This is what we need to get back to while constantly asking ourselves “what is the real reason that politicians are demanding that institutions that are responsible for fighting corruption should be weakened?”

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Within a Democracy, it is normal for there to be disagreements among political actors about what the constitution should look like.

For this reason, the constitution itself 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.

Within a Democracy, it is also normal for there to be disagreements among political actors and institutions about what the letter of the constitution actually means in practice.

For this reason, the constitution itself provides a mechanism for resolving disputes arising under the Constitution: the BiH Constitutional Court, whose decisions are “final and binding”.

Similarly, Annex 10 of the Dayton Peace Agreement provides a mechanism for resolving disagreements about the interpretation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement: the High Representative.

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My point in delving into some of the more complicated details the Dayton Peace Agreement, including the BIH Constitution is a simple one. The Dayton Peace Agreement and the Constitution as set forth in Annex 4 of that Peace Agreement cannot be changed unilaterally by either the Republika Srpska or the Federation BiH.

And anyone who tells you otherwise is not only not telling you the truth, but is actively driving the country into the past by seeking to reopen issues that were resolved twenty years

ago to bring peace to you and your families. This is – to put it mildly – shameful. Twenty years down the line, the citizens of this country are entitled to expect their political leaders to be pillars of calm and stability and not the initiators of disputes.

Instead they should be telling you why during their mandate they have not created more employment opportunities for young people. They should also be telling you why during their mandate they have not created more wealth for citizens. They should be telling you why they haven't improved local health services. They should tell you why they haven't taken steps to tackle political corruption. The list goes on.

These are all areas predominantly within the competence of the entities, yet they don't want you to worry about these things. They want you to believe that the problem is always outside of their area of responsibility where somebody else is always to blame: another ethnic group, another political party, the International Community, etc. However, everyday life takes place in the municipalities and entities. If there are problems, that is where the culprits should be looked for, and not the state level. That is too transparent.

Besides, they don't want you to challenge them as to why their vision hasn't evolved beyond the politics of hatred and division, and why they and their associates get ever richer and the poor get poorer.

They don't want you to challenge them about why they are no longer making the best of the Dayton Framework to move ahead on reforms and move decisively towards integration with the European Union and the prosperity it would bring for all.

Very simply they need to change their approach and they need to change it fundamentally, but for that to happen you, the public, need to engage more than ever before to demand that the citizens of this country are put first and that the problems of you and your families face are the one and only priority for your elected representatives.

The future can be better, but it cannot happen without your support and engagement.