

Oslobođenje: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

Oslobođenje: Governments in BiH have been agreed but not formed yet. What is the OHR's view of the most recent developments?

Valentin Inzko: Last February's protests should have been a wake-up call for politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina that something fundamental needs to change, that citizens want their elected representatives to do more than just fight for their own personal and party privileges. They want elected politicians to govern, not to abstain. The citizens demand work, not procrastination. From this perspective I am disappointed that the parties in the Federation seem to have spent virtually all their energy since the elections on squabbling with coalition partners over who will control which positions.

Five months after the elections, the establishment of authorities at all levels is the most urgent issue. There are so many challenges that the country and its citizens are facing right now – every single day that goes by without new governments means that another day is lost in the battle for better life, for jobs, for fight against corruption and crime and for progress on the country's EU path.

This is not what the citizens voted for. They expect promises that they heard during the election campaign turned into reality – promises about economic development, new jobs and better services. What is needed now is that political parties focus their energy on such concrete measures to improve the lives of ordinary citizens.

Stagnation must come to an end and that is what they have to have in mind when they negotiate about distribution of work in the new governments. During all these talks, one important fact seems to be absent from discussions: leaders are elected to represent the interests of citizens and to serve them; not to fulfil their own wishes or interests. The interests of citizens must finally take center stage – for this to happen, we must see a fundamental change in the way the politics is conducted in this country.

Oslobođenje: SNSD is questioning the legality of Zvizdić as CoM Chair, because the 35-day deadline for appointment of the new CoM has been missed. Is this true?

Valentin Inzko: Mr. Zvizdic was formally confirmed by the House of Representative as the Chair of the Council of Minister. There is nothing in the law that even implies that the mandate of the Chair of the CoM comes to an end if a CoM is not formed within the deadline. It cannot be presumed that the rights and duties of the chair have ceased.

Oslobođenje: Let me remind you: four years ago exactly, the HDZ did not participate in the government because no agreement was possible as the HDZ insisted on all Croat positions in the Federation Government. Now we have a new problem. Čović now has all the Croat positions in the Federation Government and yet he wants one Serb position, too, although - according to the SDA and DF - he had announced a minister from the Others? What can we expect of the coalition?

Valentin Inzko: A solution must be found. It is a shame that the winners of the elections, at a time when many citizens suffer economic hardship, allowed themselves the luxury of spending many months in discussions over the distribution of posts. Frankly, I am surprised that citizens have been patient for so long.

Countries that are in a far better economic situation form coalition governments within days or weeks and yet here, in a country with so many burning problems, leaders behave as if they have all the time in the world. I expect the parties who have created all this confusion over the formation of the FBiH government to resolve the situation as soon as possible, and in line with the Constitution. In the Balkans we have too much history, too much politics, but it seems, we have also a lot of time available to waste.

Oslobođenje: Mr. Bevanda said in an interview to Oslobođenje last year regarding previous government formation: "Inzko should return the division chart!" Have you done so?

Valentin Inzko: I think he was saying this ironically and very jokingly. I was not offended, such is politics. But I would like to reply in the same way, ironically and jokingly, even though we are in Lent. Of course, I am willing to return the division chart to Mr. Bevanda, but if he will then pass it on to President Cavara for ensuring the right number of ministers..

Oslobođenje: The House of Representatives of the BiH Parliament is blocked: SNSD representatives do not attend the sessions. Is the OHR going to react or help in any way because it is obvious that those who do not meet their obligations as elected representatives go with “impunity”?

Valentin Inzko: Let me remind you that this is not the first time that a party has threatened to block certain decisions through the use of the quorum rules. We have seen such threats in the past as well. The OHR view at the time and now remains the same: parties need to ensure that institutions are able to work and adopt decisions without interruptions. And we are on record with this statement then and now.

If there are serious concerns over certain decisions of the Parliament – and there might indeed be legitimate reasons for such concerns – solutions must be sought through the appropriate institutions. For instance, according to the Law on the Intelligence and Security Agency, appointments to the relevant parliamentary committee should respect the principle of proportional representation of political parties, including those which are in opposition.

But let me use this opportunity once again, to appeal to parties to seek solutions in institutions. That means to resume work and return to the Parliament.

In this respect I am encouraged by reports that the SNSD and other parties in the Parliament are talking part in an effort to find a solution to the issue of appointments to committees.

Oslobođenje: I assume that we can talk about a “good will” gesture on behalf of the SNSD, after they agreed to have the session of the House of Peoples provided that the election of the commission for the supervision of OSA is taken off the agenda. In fact, it seems that that was done in order to eliminate any arguments for your actions since it is obviously a case of a flagrant breach of the Dayton Agreement?

Valentin Inzko: Good will has nothing to do with it. It is the job of parliamentarians to come to work, to honour their mandates and enable the House of Peoples to function in a regular and uninterrupted fashion. But of course it is a positive move. This is in the interest of institutions, but above all in the interest of citizens who gave MPs their trust and support. I expect all political parties to respect the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the mandates that they received from their voters.

Oslobođenje: You have been in BiH long enough that we can ask for your assessment: when will the politicians in this country be ready to assume responsibility and accept the bizarre fact that one of the postulates of democracy is the creation of post-election coalitions?

Valentin Inzko: As you said, it is one of the corner stones of democracy and has to be accepted as such. It may sound harsh, but sometimes it seems to me that some politicians instead of taking full responsibility for their actions seek to find excuses for not doing so. However, I think that the citizens are no longer naïve and that those excuses will not fool them. Allow me to repeat that if political parties are genuine about honoring their promises to citizens and want to be re-elected, there has to be a tectonic break with the way that politics has been conducted in BiH so far. Citizens’ interests have to come first, to be the utmost priority.

Oslobođenje: Is it interesting to you that the SNSD, which blocked the Euro-Atlantic road of BiH for so long, now cannot reconcile with the fact that they are not in power at the level of BiH?

Valentin Inzko: To lose or win at the elections is totally normal and is a risk every political party willingly takes, that’s the name of the game. As Gundulic wrote 400 years ago: “The wheel of fate spins around and around ceaselessly. He who would be above is cast down, and he below is left on high.” The same goes for the post-election period. But, whether you are a part of ruling coalition or not, you can always contribute to progress. If you consider yourself a serious leader, the implementation of your goals proclaimed in the election campaign cannot change overnight. If you promised to work on creation of new jobs, does it mean you would abandon that goal if you are not part of a ruling structure? No, it just means that you would continue to fight for that goal in another way. The opposition has an important role to play in each parliament, and should do so in a constructive way. In England it is called “Royal opposition” with a shadow government. An important function in a functioning democracy. Why not try to improve proposals by the ruling parties that go in the right direction, instead of opposing them outright? Sometimes it seems that political parties, no matter how big they are, do not understand that opposition parties can play a constructive role in politics by ensuring the best possible outcome for citizens.

Oslobođenje: The Stabilisation and Association Agreement will enter into force: what does that mean for the OHR and your mandate in BiH?

Valentin Inzko: First of all, I must say that I wholeheartedly welcome this action as an important step for BiH and its future within the EU as a stable, prosperous and peaceful country. The EU has extended a hand of partnership to Bosnia and Herzegovina and is knocking strongly and loudly on the gates of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is now up to the newly elected leaders in BiH to set the country urgently back on track towards European integration. Elected representatives need to replace complacency with a sense of urgency and deliver on the expected reforms. This is what their voters expect and by which they will judge them.

As for the OHR, you know that our role has changed over the time to mirror the path of BiH. The primary driving force behind reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina should to be the pull of EU membership, and not the executive powers of the High Representative. But rest assured that my mandate remains unchanged. The OHR is still in charge of the implementation of the civilian aspects of Dayton Peace Agreement. My office will close once all the remaining conditions set in February 2008 are fulfilled, which also – and above all – includes a positive assessment of the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is for the Peace Implementation Council to determine when these conditions have been met. But let me also say very clearly: instead of using the presence of OHR or Dayton as a constant excuse for their failures or lack of action, some leaders should know better and use the presence of international community actors in BiH to seek to speed up urgently the much needed reforms.