

Speech celebrating Bosnia and Herzegovina's Membership in the UN

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***Speech by High Representative Valentin Inzko
On the Occasion of the 22nd Anniversary
Of Bosnia and Herzegovina's UN Membership
University of Sarajevo, 19 May 2014***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will start by expressing condolences to the relatives of the victims and those who have suffered in this terrible flood.

At the same time, I would like to begin by thanking Professor Avdispahic for inviting me to join you here at the University of Sarajevo to mark the 22nd anniversary of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership of the UN.

It was on 22 May 1992 that the UN General Assembly – without a vote – accepted Bosnia and Herzegovina as a member to the United Nations.

Previously – on 20 May – the UN Security Council had adopted a resolution recommending the country's membership and expressing its conviction that “Bosnia and Herzegovina will make a significant contribution to the work of the organisation”.

In this positive context, it is a pleasure to be here and to take part in today's discussion.

This anniversary of UN membership comes during a particularly challenging period, but, of course, if we consider the circumstances when the country first joined the UN, things

fall into perspective. In May 1992 darkness was descending across Bosnia and Herzegovina: today, for all the problems, there is a lot more light than darkness.

In the years since the war the country and its people have placed a significant distance between a tragic past and a flawed present. Much ground has been covered – the challenge now is not only to continue moving in the right direction but to move *faster*, so that we can complete the transition to full and lasting recovery.

UN partnership

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have made progress working together with international partners – and the United Nations has been one of the key strategic partners.

During the conflict, men and women of the UN Protection Force worked diligently to mitigate some of the worst effects of the conflict. UNPROFOR personnel made it possible for UN and other humanitarian agencies to bring aid to citizens, and many paid with their lives.

After the war, the UN International Police Task Force helped to depoliticise the police service, while UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and other UN agencies continued to offer long-term assistance, and some of these agencies remain active in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

UN personnel have applied a wide range of expertise in order to make a direct and effective contribution to post-war recovery. And as soon as it was in a position to do so Bosnia and Herzegovina began to reciprocate.

When I addressed the UN Security Council four years ago, Bosnia and Herzegovina had just begun its two-year mandate as a non-permanent Security-Council member, a role it played with distinction. And since some years back units of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina have successfully

participated in UN-mandated international peace-support missions.

Troops from Bosnia and Herzegovina deployed internationally are an important element in extending global solidarity to people who are beset by conflict – and in a very particular way they offer hope, because they come from a country that has experienced the nightmare of war and which has gone on to recover.

Obviously, there is also the issue of Srebrenica. I would like to briefly quote Kofi Annan who said in 1999, “Srebrenica crystallized a truth understood only too late by the United Nations and the world at large: that Bosnia was as much a moral cause as a military conflict. The tragedy of Srebrenica will haunt our history forever.”

He added that the cardinal lesson of Srebrenica is that “a deliberate and systematic attempt to terrorize, expel or murder an entire people must be met decisively with all necessary means.”

Golden opportunities

Speaking at the Security Council in May 2010, I noted that circumstances in the Western Balkans had significantly changed for the better. This was a period when neighbouring countries – committed to European integration and keen to be part of a Southeast European economic, cultural and political renaissance – started to address the difficult truths about what happened during the 1990s. Diplomatic overtures were being made, and enmities that had festered for more than a decade were beginning to be put to rest.

I said then that Bosnia and Herzegovina stood to benefit from this new and more promising regional environment.

Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge, four years on, this hasn't turned out to be the case.

The country has been unable to seize a golden opportunity because its leaders have been unable to summon the will or the imagination to move Bosnia and Herzegovina with the rest of the region in a more promising direction.

Has the opportunity been squandered? Yes, it has.

And citizens are suffering today as a result. High rates of poverty, crime, corruption and unemployment can all be attributed to the political failure to move towards deeper European integration in tandem with all of Bosnia and Herzegovina's neighbours.

Has the opportunity been lost for good? No, it hasn't.

It's very important that this basic – and positive – fact is kept in the public eye, especially in the months leading up to the October general elections.

The opportunity is not gone forever. Bosnia and Herzegovina can get back on the right road. It is still possible to make up the ground that has been lost in recent years.

The regional environment remains positive.

Croatia, of course, is now an EU member state, which means that Bosnia and Herzegovina is literally on the EU's border. Serbia has made significant progress on its road to European integration, and other neighbouring countries are moving in the same direction.

In the meantime, the EU Delegation and EUSR offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina constitute the most extensive EU diplomatic operation of this kind anywhere in the world, reflecting the EU's continuing determination to offer this country all the support it needs to overcome obstacles on the path to European integration.

The only issue is whether or not Bosnia and Herzegovina will rise to the challenge and use that support and the positive

environment in the region.

Civil society finds its voice

And it is possible that this question will not be answered by party leaders but by the citizens themselves, because the domestic political environment may be in the midst of a significant shift.

In the last twelve months, civil society in this country has started to find its voice. Citizens across the political and geographical spectrum have come together to articulate their dissatisfaction with the status quo and the deteriorating socio-economic situation.

Not even the party leaders would argue that they have delivered on their promises in recent years. Citizens are demanding an explanation for the lack of progress.

They want to know

- Why Bosnia and Herzegovina is not moving forward on the EU agenda and thus losing millions of Euros in EU funds instead of spending those funds on projects that will help citizens;
- Why the authorities do nothing to combat corruption which is present at all levels of the society;
- Why the business environment is not conducive to investments that could generate jobs in BiH;
- Why public revenue, including revenue from the state-of-the-art VAT system, is not allocated at sufficient levels for economic development and improvement of services that benefit citizens;
- Why public debate has been stifled by the political control of media outlets and the harassment of independent journalists.

These questions can be answered in the coming months. The

election campaign is taking place at a time when citizens have a great deal to say, a time when the appetite for real debate and dialogue has never been greater. With the new assertiveness of citizens it could even be said that the 2014 campaign will be the first real election campaign since Bosnia and Herzegovina gained UN membership 22 years ago.

If the country's four million citizens really do assert themselves, then the parties will have to explain their platforms more clearly and convincingly. The countrywide protests of the last twelve months have demonstrated that citizens are no longer prepared to accept slogans as a substitute for practical policies – and that citizens can reach across community lines even if some of the main parties are reluctant to do this.

Four years ago when I spoke to the Security Council I alluded to the fact that there was a damaging lack of consensus among the parties over what sort of country Bosnia and Herzegovina should be. There was a lack of common vision.

Well, we must all acknowledge that this remains true today.

But if politicians cannot forge a common vision, that doesn't mean that citizens cannot forge such a vision themselves.

A recent survey of citizens across the country found that almost 80 percent of those polled believe that politicians are part of the problem that the families face.

Less than 5 percent believe that politicians can actually solve the problems confronting regular citizens.

In the same poll, almost three quarters of the respondents cited unemployment as the most important issue that parties should address during the election campaign. Unemployment outstripped every other topic. Just three percent think that ethnic issues should be the most important campaign topic, and almost 76 percent believe that BiH citizens can get along with

one another without difficulty and that ethnic tensions are caused by politicians and not by regular citizens.

The fact is that citizens in this country are pretty much like citizens anywhere else in Europe: they have the same concerns, the same worries, and the same hopes and fears for their own future and the future of their children.

This is something that many party leaders do not want to hear.

But it's a fact, whether they want to hear it or not.

A dynamic, issues-based election campaign

And this is why I believe this election campaign may be among the most substantial and significant ever.

Many candidates may be intending to fall back on familiar stories that generate fear and mistrust – but citizens want to talk about how candidates will deal with the material and social difficulties the country faces.

And unlike previous elections, the citizens will need to set the agenda for debate this time round. That is what they have been doing for the last twelve months. Citizens have been taking the initiative and forcing their political representatives to react.

This is a positive development in a healthy democracy.

Many of the difficulties the country is experiencing could have been avoided if the golden opportunity of the last few years hadn't been thrown away.

But the question now is: how do we seize the opportunities that are still before us?

Since the end of the war Bosnia and Herzegovina has made progress using the tools that were set in place under the Dayton Agreement. Things are considerably better today than

they were ten or fifteen years ago.

But they could be very much better – and they *will* be very much better if the Dayton tools are put to work on behalf of citizens instead of being used – as has been the case recently – to block progress and to make citizens' lives miserable.

This unacceptable situation can be reversed by a dynamic and issues-based election campaign.

The task before the political parties is to make a convincing case that they can turn that prospect into reality. If that is what they are promising to do then it's reasonable to ask that they explain how they propose to do it.

This week we are marking the 22nd anniversary of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership of the United Nations. Twenty-two years ago when it was accepted as a new member state the country had entered what turned out to be three and a half years of terrible darkness. Today, there is light. We can see our way forward. Things can get better and they can get better very quickly if citizens take the fate of the country into their own hands and debate a positive agenda.

This has already started to happen: if the voice of citizens becomes louder and more confident in the coming months then we will have more grounds for optimism than we have had for many years.

Thank you