A Priceless Part of the European Heritage

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Speech by High Representative Valentin Inzko
On the Occasion of the Formal Re-Opening of Vijećnica
Sarajevo 9 May 2014

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Honoured President Izetbegović,
Honoured Mayor Komšić,
Honoured Special Representative Sørensen,
Honoured guests,

Dear citizens of Sarajevo,

Dear, Ivo, I would like you to know that today we are all proud citizens of this wonderful city.

We are here today to say that the Vijećnica is in all our hearts, and especially in mine.

Why is that?

Long ago in 1996 the President of Austria visited Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to a wonderful Bosnian custom, when you visit someone's home for the first time, you have to bring a small gift, a small token of appreciation. I told the President's office that he cannot come without it.

Indeed, President Klestil got 1.4 million marks from the Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, intended for reconstruction of the Vijećnica.

The damp building first needed drying out. After four years of war, the roof was reconstructed. Many pillars were temporarily

reinforced with concrete. Floors were connected horizontally and vertically by steel and reinforced concrete. This stage of the reconstruction was monitored by the coordinator for development Alexander Petritz.

Shortly after the first, Austrian stage of reconstruction, a moderate earthquake struck Sarajevo. In the opinion of Bakir Izetbegović, who at the time served as Head of the Construction Institute, the Vijećnica would have collapsed without this first stage of renovation.

Of course, this was followed by the important and more expensive second stage, which was funded by the Kingdom of Spain, and above all the EU.

We are here to witness the restoration of an extraordinary building and the recovery of a priceless part of the heritage of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the people of the world. 118 years ago, this construction project was a joint endeavour by local experts and those from the wider region.

The Vijećnica merges artistic conventions from East and West in a distinctive way, and has made a place for itself not just in the topography of the city, but in the hearts of citizens – it is not only a landmark: it is a much-loved landmark.

The burning of books here in August 1992 was an act of vandalism that deprived Europe of a unique part of its intellectual and cultural heritage. And for the last twenty years, as well as rebuilding libraries and cultural institutions, a global effort has been sustained to restore the books and manuscripts that were inside the original buildings.

This is about restoring the densely woven intellectual tapestry of our continent – a tapestry of diverse cultures and beliefs and peoples.

And it is about asserting the value of reasoned argument, a

value that desperately needs to be upheld today. The Vijećnica stands as a noble and enduring testament to that value.

When Vedran Smailović filled the blackened shell of this building with lyrical music in the summer of 1992 he asserted the primacy of tolerance over bigotry, of art over violence, of love over hate. That gesture testified to the courage and resilience of citizens, and it testified to the power of ideas in the face of physical destruction.

I am reminded of lines by the poet Rilke, when he describes the noble head, in the scale of the stars.

The restoration of this building symbolises a fundamental human truth: amid many difficulties and over many years – it is goodness and beauty that prevail.

An invaluable contribution

The Vijećnica is a reflection of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that has a very particular place in the world. This society has experienced intense and painful outbreaks of chauvinism but for much longer periods it has patiently and productively developed a culture of tolerance from which the rest of our continent can learn.

The Vijećnica brings together Mamluk elements seen in Cairo, elements from Maghreb, star-shaped arabesques, Pseudo-Moorish decorations and elements from the Viennese *Magistrat*, crafted by Czech and local architects Karel Pařík, Ćiril Iveković and Alexander Wittek, who made two trips to Cairo while planning the construction of this building.

The Vijećnica is a symbol of harmonious coexistence of many architectural styles. It connects East and West, Oriental and Western styles – as a symbol of Sarajevo, as a symbol of Bosnia and Herzegovina and coexistence in this region.

We are all here today, as Europeans, to pay tribute to the

European Union’s generous help in bringing this reconstruction project to such marvellous fruition.

But here in this magnificent centre of culture and learning we also assert that Bosnia and Herzegovina has an invaluable cultural, social and political contribution to make to Europe and the world. It is not by accident that last month Saša Stanišić, who was born in BiH, won the prestigious prize for the best German book at the famous Leipzig Book Fair.

Dear citizens of Sarajevo, the Vijećnica has risen from the ashes, and in the same way Bosnia and Herzegovina will again stand with its head held high.

Today and forever, let the restored Vijećnica serve as a source of strength and inspiration to those who are working to rebuilt coexistence, togetherness, tolerance and the civilization of love as the central pillars of this beautiful country.

Thank you.