

Oslobođenje: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Jelena Milanović

Oslobođenje: The Peace Implementation Council, US Embassy in our country, you - all speak equally about the need for the politicians to hear the voice of the people, but all the politicians are ready to do is to accuse each other. What do you expect: who will give way?

Valentin Inzko: The message from the protesters in all cities and in all regions is very clear: a fundamental change in the way politics is conducted in this country is essential. This new way of doing politics must put the interests of ordinary citizens first and address their pressing concerns, such as unemployment and the fight against corruption.

I understand that political parties already have their eyes set on the elections, but this does not absolve them of their responsibilities. Some politicians may believe that they can divert the attention of voters from the prevailing economic and social situation and their own performance and failures over the last three years. Let me be blunt: There should be no way back to the stagnation we have seen for so many years now. The people will see through this.

Oslobođenje: Nobody justifies violence, but it is completely clear that the earlier peaceful protests left the authorities indifferent. Is there a solution?

Valentin Inzko: I fully and whole-heartedly support the rights of citizens throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina to demonstrate and to engage peacefully in civic activities to protest about the current economic, social and political situation in the country. The Peace Implementation Council Steering Board also made these points very clear in its statement earlier this week.

At the same time, I condemn the violence that we saw by small groups at some of the demonstrations last Friday. Violence against protesters, police, journalists, and public property is not acceptable, and it is now up to the relevant authorities to look into this issue and take the necessary action.

Nevertheless, leaders need to engage seriously in dialogue with the citizens and not allow the violent actions of a few to be an excuse for not addressing the legitimate frustrations and demands which have been expressed peacefully. Reform is needed now.

I also do not agree with the attempt by some leaders to portray these protests as ethnically motivated, something which clearly are not. I call on leaders throughout the country to refrain from such irresponsible statements, trying to add an ethnic dimension to protests which have nothing to do with whether someone is a Serb, a Croat, or a Bosniak. Citizens are deeply concerned for their future and expect politicians to act on their demands. The last thing they want is politicians who abuse the protests to score political points or raise ethnic tensions.

Oslobođenje: Milorad Dodik does not want extraordinary elections, Zlatko Lagumdžija does not want early elections, but the two of them are the leading coalition partners in BiH. Do you think they can agree? Are you ready to make a decision on extraordinary elections?

Valentin Inzko: The question of early elections is a complex one from the legal point of view and, in my mind, misses the point.

The ongoing demonstrations have happened for a clear reason, and they should be a wake up call. The priority must be to address socio-economic and political reforms, which are in the interest of the citizens. The priority must also be to address conditions which would enable BiH to move forward on the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda.

The debate on having early or extraordinary elections must be considered in this light. Such elections would be one possible measure to consider, however, it is clear that the main focus of the authorities must be on addressing the frustrations which citizens are expressing with regard to corruption and other socio-economic problems.

Considering early elections, it must be taken into account that they can only occur in BiH if an elected body is dissolved in the manner prescribed in the relevant constitutions and laws. As it stands now, the mandates of

representatives elected in early elections would, however, only last until the time of regular elections, that is only to October. Early elections are therefore not really a viable solution in a situation where regular elections are due to take place in eight months' time.

On the other hand, extraordinary elections for a full term of four years are not possible under the current BiH Constitution and they would require substantial changes to the legal framework. The proposal that the BiH Parliamentary Assembly would be able to call for extraordinary elections at all levels raises a number of questions under the current constitutional framework in BiH. I believe that that the parties from Republika Srpska rightly argue that the BiH Parliamentary Assembly cannot pass legislation that would allow it to dissolve lower-level legislatures.

Oslobođenje: Your statement that the present situation in BiH is the most difficult since the war and that, if the situation escalates, one should think about EU troops, was criticized. You also mentioned the need to strengthen the rule of law. How can that be achieved?

Valentin Inzko: I have already clarified my comments of last week on EUFOR, which were taken out of context, and EU High Representative Ashton has also been clear on this point.

Turning to the question of the rule of law, the frustration of everyday people with the level of corruption in this country is clearly a major factor behind the ongoing protests. The frustration of citizens over this issue is something that poll after poll has demonstrated in recent years. I hope that the current and future authorities of this country will finally take this problem seriously and I commend those citizens throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina who have in recent days in a peaceful and dignified manner demanded positive change that is in the interest of all. They are an example to us all and I am truly humbled by what they are doing.

Oslobođenje: Please: Bosniak leaders claim that this is a world-wide conspiracy against Bosniaks, Lagumdžija implicitly accused the "European fingers", Dragan Čović says that it is a pity that the Federation is not structured like the RS but he also thinks that this is a scheme against Croats, in particular in Mostar, while Milorad Dodik accuses the entire international community that, by encouraging protests, it wants to abolish Republika Srpska. What is it about?

Valentin Inzko: Let us remember how the most recent wave of protests began before jumping to conclusions about motives. They originated in Tuzla and were organised by workers of former state companies, who protested against the closure of companies and the way the privatisation process was conducted. The protests grew when other workers, citizen's associations, youth, pensioners and war veterans came out on the streets across BiH to express their grievances. The leitmotiv of the protests was social injustice, not politics.

I therefore appeal to politicians to refrain from channeling this public anger at social and economic problems into an ethnic dimension. These protests are not about who is a Bosniak, Croat, a Serb or an Other. It is about jobs and a normal, dignified life for all. All citizens share the same concerns.

Oslobođenje: The state and Federation parliaments are blocked again, which means that every civil revolt is used by the parliaments to stop working, to talk about a lack of security and go into exhausting political squabbling, while at the same time the Constitution of BiH guarantees that the representatives will get their salaries: how do we get out of this vicious circle?

Valentin Inzko: Some politicians may be tempted to use the protests as a fresh excuse not to turn up to work and to avoid taking the decisions that they are paid to take. This would be a serious misjudgment of the mood in the country. Attendance at sessions of the political institutions at all levels is not a choice for elected politicians, but rather an obligation to the voters who elected them. I have made this point clear in my meetings with the political leaders and I expect that the institutions will soon start working in full capacity with the aim of addressing the many outstanding reforms.

I am confident that citizens will carefully scrutinise the actions of each politician throughout these protests and over the next few months and deliver their verdict at the next elections.

Oslobođenje: The EU parliamentarians from Croatia propose a special program for the accession of BiH to the EU, but it is clear that Europe is not particularly interested in any serious dealing with the problems of BiH. Can, for example, one of the signs of good will towards BiH be to unfreeze the funds,

or does the EU think that the citizens of BiH should bear the consequences of the actions of politicians. What do you expect from the visit of Catherine Ashton and Štefan Füle to Sarajevo?

Valentin Inzko: As a result of the ongoing demonstrations, we have seen an increased attention towards BiH, not only from the EU but also from other members of the international community. This attention is welcome and it sends a clear message that the international community cares about Bosnia and Herzegovina and is ready to help the citizens and the authorities to find solutions to the ongoing problems.

However, it is not the international community which will solve the problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is now the responsibility of all the authorities and leaders in this country to take action to solve the long-standing problems in the country. The International Community can help, but the main responsibility lies with BiH and its leaders.