

Večernji list: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Dejan Jazvić

Večernji list: Are you ready to accept or at least consider requests by certain parties to use your powers and enable holding of extraordinary elections in BiH?

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 justified frustrations which citizens are expressing with regard to corruption and other socio-economic and political 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. This would mean that there would be two elections in the same year. 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.

Večernji list: Do you believe that the protests, particularly the violent ones, were spontaneous and exclusively had social causes?

Valentin Inzko: I fully and whole-heartedly support the right 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.

We also need to 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, citizens 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 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 in a manner that is consistent with the law.

Nevertheless, we must remember that in the course of the last week, since Friday, the protests have been peaceful. 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 and which we all know have been building up for years.

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.

Večernji list: How do you comment raising certain political issues at the protests, such as abolition of cantons, and the fact that the protests were mainly directed at cantonal institutions?

Valentin Inzko: The main message emanating from the protests is that citizens are tired of divisive rhetoric, inaction, empty promises and excuses. Protesters are venting their anger at the current economic, social and political situation. They are fed up with politicians on all sides who do not listen to them and do not find solutions to their problems. These protests are not about who is a Bosniak, Croat, a Serb or an Other. All citizens share the same concerns. An empty stomach is an empty stomach, regardless of nationality.

Given the wide mix of protestors, the demands of all the protestors are not the same. However, the main anger has been directed towards the current economic and social situation, including corruption.

At the same time, it is a fact that the Federation and its governing structures are inefficient and expensive. The fact that some have called for constitutional changes should not be perceived by anyone as a threat. The demonstrations cannot by themselves lead to changes to the constitutional set-up of the Federation and its Cantons or to the structure of BiH as a whole. Such changes can only come about through the legislative process to amend constitutions, where all sides are included and certain protections exist. So let me take this opportunity to reassure people that unilateral changes to the internal structures of this country are not possible. In addition, let me be crystal clear that the international community remains absolutely committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Večernji list: The protests mainly occurred in majority Bosniak areas. How do you explain that?

Valentin Inzko: The protests may have been focused on some towns and areas, but citizens across the country and of all ethnic groups share the same concerns about corruption, high unemployment and the lack of economic opportunity. Groups throughout the country and even in neighboring countries have come out to express their support and understanding for these legitimate concerns. These are the types of issues that citizens are raising in the plena currently being held around the country.

In this context all authorities and political parties and the people as a whole should work together to address the concerns and frustrations of the citizens, instead of using the protests to further political goals or heighten ethnic divisions. If the political leaders of this country are smart they will listen very carefully to what those demonstrating are calling for and use the remaining period through to the elections to put the institutions back into the service of the citizens they are there to serve.

Večernji list: Are these events going to change the international approach to BiH in any way? There are warning voices coming from the EU saying that BiH should be a higher priority and that the implementation of the „Sejdić-Finci“ Judgment should not be taken as an eliminator condition for the continuation of European integration in BiH?

Valentin Inzko: How the European Union wants to approach this issue is not for me to decide.

What is clear is that the wider international community, not only the EU, has the same concerns and frustrations when it comes to BiH. The political leaders have for too long focused on their personal, party and what they have sought to portray as ethnic agendas without much consideration given to the country and the concrete needs of the citizens. It is a fact that the EU agenda is blocked due to the inability of BiH leaders to agree on how to implement the Sejdić-Finci agenda; however, at the same time there has also been no progress towards NATO membership or in addressing the 5+2 agenda. More fundamentally, we have not seen the scale of reform that is necessary to improve the investment climate and create jobs.

Večernji list: The latest resolution of the European Parliament pointed out the problems in BiH pretty clearly. Do you agree with assessments that unitary and separatist aspirations are to blame for the dysfunctionality of BiH, and that a way out should be sought in federalism?

Valentin Inzko: I do not think that it is fair to reduce what is a very comprehensive resolution by the European Parliament to such a narrow reading. Parliamentarians expressed their deep concern at the continuing lack of

common vision displayed by the main political leaders in BiH and called for a shift away from nationalist and ethnocentric rhetoric. They also urged the authorities in BiH to strengthen the efficiency and functionality of institutions. What is important now is to enact changes aimed at improving citizens' lives and ensuring that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not left behind the other countries in the region.

Večernji list: What is your view of the behavior of the neighboring countries during the protests in BiH? Some Bosniak politicians, media and intellectuals have seriously begrudged Prime Minister Milanović's visit to Mostar?

Valentin Inzko: Bosnia and Herzegovina has the benefit of the best regional situation in the last 20 years. Authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have good relations with Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. In this context, I have no reason to question the actions and motives of authorities in the neighbouring countries, that they are sincere in their wish to help BiH address its current problems so that it too can move forward on the EU agenda.

Večernji list: What do you expect will happen in the pre-election period in BiH? Of course, under the condition the election is held in October, as planned?

Valentin Inzko: I understand that political parties already have their eyes set on the elections, but this does not absolve them of the responsibility to find solutions to the many issues before them right now. Some may believe that they can divert the attention of voters from the prevailing economic, social and political situation and their own performance and failures over the last three years. Let me be blunt: that simply is not going to work, especially now. The people have awoken and I believe they see more clearly than ever that they are not threatened by other ethnicities, what they are threatened by is the failures of their own representatives over many many years. Economic development is in the vital interest of all of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of nationality. The voters of this country will see through any new attempts to blame other ethnicities for their problems. Now is the time for the people to speak up – they have no need for people to be afraid of telling politicians their opinions. What is clear is that the way politics is conducted at all levels must change, and it must change fundamentally. This is the litmus test for every politician and political party.