

Nezavisne novine: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Almedin Šišić

Two weeks before Croatia is set to join the EU, the High Representative Valentin Inzko calls upon authorities and politicians in BiH to urgently start resolving the basic problems faced by citizens of our country.

After a series of protests in BiH with different demands, in an interview for “Nezavisne novine” Inzko remarks that citizens are fed up with the situation in which politicians and institutions fail to meet even their essential needs.

“State and all other authorities need to get back to work and must meet urgently and in permanence to ensure that the citizens of BiH will not be left in the cold on 1 July,” Inzko said.

Nezavisne novine: Is it true that you stated that RS because of its approach to these protests looked like the North Korea, or maybe that was taken out of the context?

Valentin Inzko: I was alluding to the possibility of the protests being banned and how this would be perceived. Not only students, but every citizen has a right to demonstrate and to express their views. In a democratic society, you simply cannot suppress the views of citizens by forbidding them to take to the streets and say what they think.

I am glad that students were in the end allowed to protest peacefully on Wednesday and make their voice heard, and I congratulate both the security agencies and the organisers of the protests for ensuring an orderly conduct of the demonstrations.

It is important to hear the opinions of citizens also in-between elections, because democracy does not happen only every four years. Of course, protests also need to be conducted in accordance with the law and in a way that does not infringe the rights of others or disrupt the work of institutions.

What I have taken from the demonstrations around the country is that citizens have reached the point where they are fed up with the failures of politicians and institutions to address their most basic needs. I think this was only a matter of time that we saw this because we all know that the way politics is being conducted in this country is simply not delivering.

Nezavisne novine: How do you in general assess the students’ protests, taking into account many controversies following the preparation itself and their course?

Valentin Inzko: I am not aware of all details surrounding the organization of protests, but the key issue here, and message to the authorities is: listen to your youth, listen to your citizens! They are the future of this country. Help them become valuable contributors to the society. We are all well aware of the fact that many young people want to leave the country, not because they don’t like it here, but because they just want a normal life, an opportunity to learn and develop a perspective, and that is what politicians at the helm should provide them with.

Their messages are strong and loud. As in other parts of the world, it is the youth that wants changes and their voice must not be ignored. Protests should not be dismissed as a conspiracy against the ruling coalition, regardless of which level of government we are talking about.

Nezavisne novine: In general, these days in many places in BiH the people were expressing their dissatisfaction in the street, but the embryo of dissatisfaction comes from Sarajevo. It seems that the protestors are not happy with the fact that you will not be using the Bonn Powers with regard to passing the Law on Single Personal Identification Number (JMBG) and they in a way feel cheated. Your comment?

Valentin Inzko: Quite frankly, I am surprised that citizens did not go out to the streets much earlier. It has been a long time that the country is not moving forward in the way that the citizens and the international community have long expected. After so many years of waiting for things to change for the better, even the most optimistic ones have got tired and lost patience with the political establishment in this country. For many, the JMB issue seems to have been the final drop in a glass full of dissatisfaction with the fact that the country is lagging behind its

neighbours in every aspect. For others it has been other issues. Citizens have every right to say what is bothering them and what they want, and to remind politicians that they have a job to do. Let us not forget that they were elected to work and they are paid to do by the very citizens they are supposed to be serving. When the youngest citizens of this country who cannot even speak and in some cases whose life could have been called into question are being denied their most basic rights because politicians put politics first then it is a problem that cannot be swept under the carpet. My plea to the political class in this country is that they look long and hard at what they are doing. They need to turn over a new leaf about the way they work so that they start reaching the healthy compromises that can move the country forward and address the problems citizens are facing.

If I were to impose a solution, this would go counter the demands of citizens, who rightly demand from the elected representatives to do the job for which they are paid. A Bonn power decision would get politicians off the hook and relieve them of any responsibility to resolve this pressing problem. And that is something that I and the PIC Steering Board ambassadors did not want to do. The BiH Parliamentary Assembly must implement the ruling of the BiH Constitutional Court, which is a Dayton obligation, by adopting as soon as possible a lasting solution that maintains a single State-wide system. The international community admires the energy and courage in Belgrade, which is solving big issues, while here they are unable to resolve JMB.

Nezavisne novine: Do you believe that the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH will finish this job by the deadline set by the demonstrators and what if it does not happen?

Valentin Inzko: Agreeing and implementing a permanent solution to the JMB issue is not a choice but an obligation for parliamentarians. I hope that they heard the message from citizens and the international community. The ball is now in their court: they must come to work and find a solution.

Nezavisne novine: How can the mutual trust of the parties of the Six be returned since there are those considering that their security in Sarajevo is endangered and that the protests are politically instructed, while the others are rejecting this and claim that there is no security obstacle for the continuation of work of the BiH institutions in Sarajevo?

Valentin Inzko: I believe that attempts to portray the protests as ethnically motivated are an excuse for another season of bickering instead of working and people doing the jobs for which they are being paid. No official is being paid not to work, this is doubly unacceptable at a time of such high unemployment and poverty. The worst thing that the political establishment in this country can do is to misread the mood in this country or misrepresent the protests which we have seen around the country. This will only fuel the public dissatisfaction that exists and will widen the gap between citizens and the political establishment. This gap needs to be reduced and not widened. The way to do this is to get politicians and institutions back in the service of citizens. Dissatisfaction is evident wherever you go in BiH. People want their lives to finally become better and that has nothing to do with their ethnicity or where they live.

I absolutely understand the feelings and subjective fears of people who were blocked in the Institutions Building on Thursday, and I spoke to many of them personally that night. But this issue can be resolved by a review of the security arrangements in place by the appropriate agencies. In no case should this prevent elected officials from returning to work. I commend Minister Radonicic for his proactive leadership in recent days and I fully share his assessment that conditions exist for officials and institutions to get back to work.

It is clear that members of the Parliament must have freedom of movement like all other citizens in order to fulfil their duties without interruptions. This is a basic civil right which needs to be respected in parallel with the right to protest.

Unfortunately, some politicians have deliberately misinterpreted the events of Thursday night as an ethnically motivated protest in an attempt to score cheap political points and avoid tackling the real issues raised by the protestors. That is a scenario we have seen many times before. I hope that citizens will not accept any excuses and continue to demand from their elected officials to deliver the results instead of engaging in political bickering.

Nezavisne novine: BiH is truly in serious problems only 17 days before Croatia entering the EU and closure of borders, because it has to resolve some strategic issues with Croatia. What would you recommend to the political leaders, parliamentarians, in general to the executive and legislative authorities in the country?

Valentin Inzko: Two weeks from now, Croatia will join the European Union. Croatian citizens will enjoy the freedoms, rights and opportunities that go with EU membership. My message to the political elite in this country is very simple: time is running out! State and all other authorities need to get back to work and must meet urgently and in permanence to ensure that the citizens of BiH will not be left in the cold on 1 July. Insofar as Croatia is concerned, reactions from the RS are going in that direction. The problems have to be solved before 1 July! I think the worst thing that officials could do is not turn up to work. Never has it been more important for politicians and institutions to redouble their efforts. Now is not the time for political calculation, now is the time to deliver results and to get this country back on track!

- Many are afraid of what is going to happen in the country in the forthcoming months, and particularly after we get into the election year. Can we maybe expect even the most radical rhetoric and campaign of all?

Valentin Inzko: Divisive and provocative statements by BiH politicians also have consequences because they they have a negative impact on the way people in the country think and behave. They also impact negatively on perceptions in the country which have undoubtedly discouraged investment that would have brought much needed new jobs. I ask myself, if you are serious about attracting foreign investments to create new jobs why would you make statements that lead investors to conclude there is insufficient stability for them to invest? Politicians from all parts of the country need to start working together and contributing to stability through their statements to achieve what all citizens want: a better standard of living, more jobs and progress in the Euroatlantic integration process.