

# **Remarks by High Representative Valentin Inzko at a Conference on Diversity as a Valuable Resource for the Common European Future**

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**Conference organised by the European Movement with the Support of the Slovak Development Agency and the BiH Inter-Religious Council**

**Burch University, Ilidza, 30 May 2013**

**Diversity Is the Antidote to Division**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here among many old friends to discuss a subject that is central to Bosnia and Herzegovina's long road to recovery.

If there is a basic truth that should be broadcast from this conference it is that Bosnia and Herzegovina will not succeed despite its cultural diversity but precisely because it has such a rich and diverse cultural heritage.

Understanding this is key to making Bosnia and Herzegovina work. It is key to getting the country back on the European path – because diversity – not division – is the European normal.

As you know, BiH leaders are trying to reach agreement on implementing the ruling of the European Court in the Sejdic-Finci case. The Court has made a fundamental statement of principle that will benefit all the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina when it is codified in law. This principle is that every citizen – whatever their community or identity may be – is first and foremost a citizen, and the rights of citizenship cannot be abrogated in any way.

This is the clear and firm basis on which it is possible to protect and celebrate the diversity that enriches and strengthens every successful society.

The citizenship that is paramount in Europe means being free to practice your religion and to celebrate your heritage within a broad framework of common rights and values.

This is not something we have to *invent*. It already works. What we have to do is *apply* this principle more dynamically, more robustly, more confidently in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Some continue to insist that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a normal country and because it is not a normal country its citizens cannot subscribe to the same values or enjoy the same rights as citizens in the rest of Europe.

This false premise must be categorically and energetically rejected.

Not only can BiH citizens in principle enjoy the same rights and subscribe to the same values as citizens anywhere else in the continent – because of their distinctive heritage they can be champions of these rights and these values even in Europe. I have said many times, of course BiH should be made to look more like Europe, but at the same time, in certain regards, Europe should be made to look more like BiH.

It is time that we stopped indulging the small coterie of articulate pessimists who believe that culture is a burden.

It isn't a burden: it's an asset.

For too long, culture has been held up as an inevitable cause of division in BiH society. Not nearly often enough do we look critically at the people who trot out this argument as though it were a self-evident truth. It is an argument that is lazy, dishonest and false – though it suits those who would do better out of a country that fails than a country that succeeds.

The truth is that in Bosnia and Herzegovina civic values that have been lost in other parts of Europe – hospitality, neighbourhood solidarity, merhametluk – have survived. They have survived despite the best efforts of bigots and chauvinists to snuff them out. They haven't survived despite this country's rich and distinctive cultural heritage – they have survived because of that heritage.

I believe it is time to stop indulging those who are committed to failure. It is time to start spreading the message – with confidence and conviction – that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a unique capacity to demonstrate that cultural diversity *works*.

Economics and politics are important but culture is food for the soul – and Europe can be enriched by Bosnia and Herzegovina's rich and diverse cultural heritage – just as that heritage can be strengthened through deeper European integration.

Some people are afraid that their identity could be diluted in the European mix: the truth is – and this is borne out by the experience of the 27 member states – that it will be protected. The truth is that it will be celebrated.

Cultural diversity is the antidote to social and political division. It is a key element in this country's long road to recovery and we should champion this diversity rather than seeing it as some sort of problem that has to be solved.

Thank you.