

Remarks by HR and EUSR Valentin Inzko at a Conference on Southeast Europe in Dialogue with Austria, Germany and the US “Coming to terms with the past, reconciliation, the role of civil society”



Resisting the Temptation to Hate

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Relations among the Western Balkan states have improved during 2010 to such a degree that I do not think it an exaggeration to speak of an ongoing process of regional reconciliation in the Balkans.

The Serbian Parliament's acknowledgement and apology, in March this year, for the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica created a foundation for a process of reconciliation. This was followed by the successful meeting in Istanbul, under the auspices of Turkish President Abdullah Gul, of Serbian President Boris Tadic and the then Chair of the BiH Presidency, Haris

Silajdzic.

President Tadic visited Bosnia and Herzegovina in late May, and in Sarajevo he and President Filip Vujanovic of Montenegro, Croatian President Ivo Josipovic and Presidency Member Silajdzic formally endorsed the progress that has been made by NGOs during the last decade, in promoting reconciliation through the Igman Process.

The forward momentum was sustained by the EU-Western Balkans meeting organised in June in Sarajevo by the Spanish Presidency and it has been further enhanced by bilateral visits at senior level – including the participation of President Tadic and other dignitaries from neighbouring countries at the Srebrenica commemoration in July.

The eminently pragmatic premise of much of this rapprochement is that the challenges of security, economic development and EU integration can only be met successfully if the effort has a regional dimension.

Everyone understands that declarations and visits by themselves will not mend fences. But such initiatives can serve as starting points for a new and more successful approach.

And it is in this improved environment that we can make progress in 2011.

It is becoming possible to tackle problems that have seemed insurmountable for many years.

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It is this spirit of rapprochement that we would like to see inside Bosnia and Herzegovina itself.

Between the elections of 2006 and those of 2010 the political climate was dominated by confrontation, be it that politicians from the RS called for secession, some Croats called for a

third entity or Bosniaks for a centralised state. We witnessed stalemate on the political scene and almost no progress on the path to transatlantic integration and OHR-closure. And we had to hear words that hurt, like the denial of genocide in Srebrenica.

But all this, I believe, can change. The elections on 3 October indicated a shift in support towards pragmatic and constructive options. The task now is to ensure that this is reflected in the policies and approach of the incoming governments. They have to seize this opportunity for a fresh start.

Even in the previous obstructionist climate all of the political factions worked constructively to adopt and implement the broad range of administrative and political measures that were needed in order to secure visa-free travel.

This has shown that when there is political will, politicians can achieve concrete results.

They can – and I believe there is a strong likelihood that they will – do the same to make similarly rapid progress in implementing the broader EU agenda now.

That would mean shifting politics away from confrontation.

And if the popular mood is genuinely reflected, I believe it also means shifting towards a conscious effort to foster reconciliation.

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Until now, many BiH leaders have proved to be better at articulating differences among communities. They have been less skilful at highlighting the commonality of experience, of interest and of outlook that exists among the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This has produced disturbing results. There have been signs of

a new intolerance, for example, among young people.

But overall, one of the most extraordinary characteristics of BiH society – its complex and successful intermingling of different cultures – has NOT been destroyed. This is the solid basis on which reconciliation over the long term can be sustained.

And it should not be forgotten that some BiH leaders, sometimes against the grain of their overall political posture, have made positive contributions to the cause of reconciliation, suggesting that decency will win out over political expediency in the end.

Three years ago the then RS Prime Minister, Milorad Dodik, expressed his revulsion over the massacre at Srebrenica and said Bosnian Serb institutions should apologize to families of those killed by Bosnian Serb forces during the conflict.

And at the beginning of last month, incoming Presidency Member Bakir Izetbegovic publicly expressed his regret for loss of civilian life caused by the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war.

These statements show that leaders are not completely out of touch with popular sentiment.

While the International Community has provided very substantial resources for refugee return in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this process could not have succeeded without the fundamental support of a majority of citizens.

The fact is that there is an enormous amount of good in this society. Of course, there are influential and vociferous individuals who are mystified by the capacity of their fellow citizens to get along – but it is imperative that these individuals are not allowed to set the agenda.

Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will succeed because

the vast majority of this country's people have resolutely resisted the temptation to hate.

We must respect that resistance and we must support it.

Although political leaders have been unable to forge and articulate a common vision, this has not been a problem among ordinary people, who repeatedly tell opinion pollsters that they want to live in a prosperous and secure democracy that is an integral part of Europe.

The civil society sector has been increasingly effective in articulating this majority aspiration, something that was very much in evidence during the NGO interventions at the meeting of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board and the EU's Political and Security Committee, both of which were held in Sarajevo about ten days ago.

By maintaining its support for the agenda of a majority of BiH citizens, the International Community will serve the cause of reconciliation, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Western Balkans as a whole.

Thank you