

# Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko to Members of the European Academy



## Real Debate and High Voter Turnout Can Restore this Country's Fortunes

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is customary at events like this – in an academic milieu and with a high degree of common purpose– for speakers to address issues with a broad brush, perhaps dealing with points of intellectual or philosophical interest.

I do not intend to do that today, because I do not believe we have the luxury of broad brushstrokes or of dwelling on intellectual niceties.

This country is at a critical juncture. Millions of citizens – who have already had to endure so much – are in danger of losing the chance to enjoy the stability and prosperity that will come with EU membership.

To prevent this from taking place we must negotiate the next two weeks very, very carefully.

And to do that we must speak truthfully and, if necessary, bluntly.

## **Principles not Parties**

I want to make my own position clear. I have a mandate to supervise implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and to facilitate progress towards EU membership. I work with all stakeholders. I do not support individual parties. I work with and for BiH citizens and I subscribe to the principles that underpin the European Union.

The issue of EU membership is central to the interests of the people of this country, and that is why I am speaking about this now. The same issue should be central to the present election campaign.

Let me begin by saying that no candidate now running for election should have the temerity to claim that all is well.

The economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is alarming. Fifteen years after the end of the conflict, half of the population is living on or below the poverty line.

Those who are seeking election on the strength of their achievements should be reminded – pointedly and often – of this fact.

And the problem hasn't diminished – it has got worse. In the last two years, registered unemployment has risen steeply to 43 percent or more than half a million people!

Foreign direct investments in the 1st quarter of the year shrank by 45.5 percent over the same period last year!

The World Bank's Doing Business Report shows Bosnia and

Herzegovina as being the worst in the region to do business in, ranking it globally as 116<sup>th</sup>. The Index of Economic Freedom places BiH as 110<sup>th</sup> globally, with its overall score well below the regional average.

These figures are self-explanatory. They are indicative not only of the recession but also of the reform stalemate.

So what is this country's European future?

It is the possibility of leaving these economic problems behind.

This country's European future means moving toward the kind of prosperity that EU member states – including new member states – have been able to achieve. When Slovenia joined the EU an average salary was Euro 670, now it is Euro 970; an unemployment rate was over 11%, now it is 6%, or half of previous rate. Consequently, it worth joining the EU.

How can this be realised?

It can be realised by implementing the programme of reforms and initiatives laid out in the European Partnership and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. There are no magic formula yet everyone had to walk that path, which is not an easy one. Austria needed six years and another two years to become a part of Schengen, Spain needed 9 years. But even a status of a candidate can get you a lot- by this I refer to accession funds.

This is what this election campaign should be about.

- The parties now in government must be invited to explain between now and 3 October why they have not implemented some European programmes – that may bring citizens the

prosperity and stability they so ardently desire.

- And the parties that are *not* in government must be invited to explain how they propose to succeed, if elected.

### **Contradictory Positions**

But the pre-election campaign has *not* been about these matters, nor it has been about economy.

At least, until now.

Until now the country's European future has been obscured by the smoke and noise of public debate that is strong on slogans and weak on detail.

The country's European future is there for the taking – Europe has been knocking on your door, but it hasn't been taken.

Citizens should demand to know why.

Some candidates have expressed their full support for the effort to move Bosnia and Herzegovina into the European Union – while steadfastly opposing initiatives that are key elements in this effort.

Establishing a single market, for example, is dismissed as being impossibly problematic. A single market would bring benefit to everyone. It already exists and why would anyone from the Balkans oppose that? It is market for 500 million people, it is market for your products, too.

The truth is that it *isn't* problematic. Market like that could be established tomorrow.

But it would not be in line with the plans and the agenda which contradicts ideas of some politicians.

The most alarming thing is that candidates – in the media and at public meetings – have not been asked to explain contradictory positions like this.

They *should* be asked.

They should be asked by reporters.

They should be asked by voters.

They should be asked by anyone who seriously believes that the citizens of this country have a place in Europe.

Because true and lasting progress on the EU agenda, along with the benefits it brings, will only be possible when politicians are obliged to explain their contradictory positions on the country's European future.

We are not going to solve major problems unless we address this issue.

We are not going to attract investment and create jobs and begin to tackle poverty unless we address this issue.

And unless citizens raise the issue, I can assure you the political establishment will continue to ignore the issue.

### **Where is the Sacrifice?**

If I appear to be calling for a more strident tone to be introduced to the election campaign, let me make it clear that this is not the case.

I am only calling for clarity.

If candidates are against joining the European Union they

should say so. Everyone is entitled to an opinion and has the right to say so. They should not speak as if they support joining the EU and act as if they aren't.

The truth is that there is no reason why any candidate should be against this country's European future.

In this respect I believe it's worth keeping in mind that "the most difficult way is very often not the best way".

Implementing the European integration agenda is not the difficult option for the people of this country.

Not implementing that agenda is the difficult option. It would mean you are in isolation.

Joining the European Union means acquiring the same personal and political guarantees that are enjoyed by 500 million EU citizens.

Joining the European Union means enjoying the same human rights, the same civil rights, the same protection under the law as 500 million EU citizens.

Joining the European Union means gaining – not losing – security, stability and prosperity.

Where is the sacrifice in this?

### **European policy blocked**

Bosnia and Herzegovina could have been on the fast track to EU membership by now if its politicians had not got bogged down in arguments over their own prerogatives.

The unemployment rate might have been reduced – instead of being pushed up – if politicians had undertaken measures to

improve the BiH business environment and make it attractive for foreign investments.

Yet some politicians who have blocked the implementation of coordinated and effective economic policy are now running for election on the grounds that they know how to get into Europe.

The road to Europe is clearly marked. It follows the reform agenda that includes these and other strategies. These strategies only need to be followed, and that is no secret. When others could do it, BiH can do it too.

### **Make things better; bring Europe closer**

And the road to Europe is not the most difficult way.

Clearly, the hard-pressed people of this country are now on a very difficult road indeed. Reforms that would create jobs and raise living standards have been opposed, sabotaged and abandoned.

This is *not* the best way.

If that way were taken, the prospect of turning Bosnia and Herzegovina into a normal, stable, prosperous European democracy would be brought immeasurably closer.

I do not believe citizens want to continue on the present difficult road. I believe there is an overwhelming majority in support of returning to the European road. It is the easier road. It is the road we had started on, the road from Dayton to Brussels. It is the road that leads us where we want to go. It is the road we *can* return to.

But for that to happen, the issue of how best to lead the way into Europe has to be placed at the centre of the campaign debate – and that is why the next two weeks are so crucial.

## Telling the Truth

As I said at the beginning, my own role and that of the International Community is to articulate principles – not to support parties.

As EU Special Representative my job is to work with BiH stakeholders to facilitate in every way possible the country's path to Europe. This means ensuring that citizens have access to the facts.

The truth is that there are no authentic obstacles to implementing the EU agenda – and there have never been authentic obstacles. This country could already be enjoying the social and economic benefits that this agenda can deliver. It could have had a thriving market by now, delivering jobs and prosperity.

This country could have been on the fast track to Europe and – here is the key point – it can *still* get onto the fast track if these elections prompt a change of policy.

Voters have to ask a simple question.

Are you for implementing the EU agenda or are you not?

They must demand a clear answer.

And on 3 October they will determine whether they like the answer.

There are two weeks until polling day – two weeks that will affect the destinies of millions. This is serious business and it cannot be conducted through party slogans and nationalist mantras. It needs serious debate. It needs real analysis. If candidates are against the European agenda they should say so;



if they are for it they should explain how they propose to implement it.

Professional politicians often complain about the low turnout in elections, and citizens often complain that they don't vote for any party because "they're all the same".

Actually they're *not* all the same. Some will get back on the road to Europe and some will not. And a proper debate is needed before it becomes clear which will and which won't.

I believe that that sort of debate can have a real and positive impact on the popular turnout on 3 October. More people will vote if they sense that they must make a real choice. If they want a European future then they must take an active role in making it happen – and that means casting a ballot.

I know that 60% of young people do not want to vote, because they are all disappointed, and I know that 70% of them wants to leave BiH, but I want to urge everyone, especially young people, to get out and vote on election day.

A real election debate and a high turnout on polling day can restore this country's fortunes. I hope that all of you will work with me to secure that positive outcome.

Thank you.