



Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “New Challenges Demand New Responses”

In Bihac this week, I recalled vividly an earlier visit to the town, with the first convoy of humanitarian aid to make it into the area at the end of the war. Then, we encountered scenes that should never have disgraced the face of Europe. Malnutrition was rife, and, because of the absence of medical provision, disease was taking a heavy toll on a population already traumatised by fighting that had raged back and forth for three years.

This week, I visited a dairy company where I spoke to managers and workers about the challenges they face in turning their business into a regional concern that creates more jobs and generates more export income for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I'm not going to argue that everything is rosy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It isn't. But huge progress has been made since 1995 – and this progress has been a direct result of pragmatism and compromise, two political options much criticised in the media and among large numbers of elected representatives.

Unfortunately, on the very same visit, I was presented with more evidence of zero-sum politics: even though cantonal parties had agreed to a government, and my Office spent time and resources in conducting the vetting process, they decided at the last minute to abandon the deal. Now the process has to start over again, seven months after the elections.

I was also in Drvar this week. A decade ago I had to explain patiently and at great length to the then deputy mayor of Drvar that refugee return is a basic human right. Although this right is explicitly upheld in the Dayton Agreement, the deputy mayor believed that his political masters hadn't really meant what they had signed. I spoke with the deputy mayor because the mayor wouldn't see me (and gave orders for me to be prevented from entering the municipality building). How things have changed in Drvar. This week in the Municipal Assembly, I engaged in a dialogue about infrastructure investment and economic regeneration.

The issues I and others addressed in Bosnia and Herzegovina a decade and more ago are different from the issues I have had to address as High Representative. I am grateful for this – because it means that the country has moved on. It could have moved faster, of course – and it will move faster if more of its leaders begin to understand that coming up with the same responses to changing problems does not represent consistency, but living in the past.

Since the beginning of my political career, I have concentrated on getting things done. It is the only thing of value in politics. You cannot do everything that you want to do – the important thing is to do as much as you possibly can.

The fact is that a lot has been achieved in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war. The many achievements, however, have not been the work of those politicians who confuse mud-slinging with policy-making and obduracy with consistency. Rather, all too often, they have been the achievements of ordinary citizens whose resilience and determination in the face of material, administrative and political obstacles have helped put this country back on its feet. Indeed, politicians would do well to take a lead from the pragmatism of their fellow citizens to come up with new responses to new challenges.

This week, I also visited Bosanska Krupa, which, like so many communities all across Bosnia and Herzegovina, has seen terrible times and has since moved on to experience some of the dividends that come from reconciliation and recovery. As in Bihac and Drvar, I was able to see hard evidence, in terms of new infrastructure and public services, that pragmatic approaches deliver more to citizens than out-of-date mantras.

It was my privilege to live and work in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the difficult days immediately after the war – my privilege because I saw at first hand the extraordinary courage and moral integrity of citizens who were determined to rebuild and who had confidence in the future of what was then a broken country. As High Representative, I have sought to keep faith with those citizens – not by living in the past but by working with those who are developing new responses for the present, and the future. And I will continue to work for that future.

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