

Remarks by Senior Deputy High Representative Peter Bas-Backer at the 1st Balkan Mosaic Conference in BiH



"Building a Stronger Civil Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for offering me the opportunity to speak at this conference, the aims of which I consider to be as relevant as they are important.

As Senior Deputy High Representative, one of my core responsibilities is to do all I can to promote the strengthening of civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly by assisting civil society actors in their efforts to establish efficient and sustainable cooperation mechanisms with the domestic authorities.

Given the national, constitutional and administrative complexity of BiH – not to mention its painfully recent past – this is no easy task.

A highly illustrative example is the Draft Agreement on Cooperation Between the BiH Council of Ministers and the NGO Sector in BiH. Although this Agreement is set to be adopted and signed any day now, it has taken a very long time and much

intensive lobbying to get even this far. Ensuring that this Agreement will indeed provide a framework for an authentic partnership on all issues of mutual concern between NGOs and the CoM – and of citizens in general – will take yet more time, effort and good will.

A vital and engaged civil society is, of course, of crucial importance: not only for the long-term success and sustainability of all the reforms on which this country has embarked over the past few years, but also for the sustainability of the country itself.

NGOs and other civil society actors have a crucial role to play in the development of a strong, stable and cohesive society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As was rightly noted last week at another conference,^{*} there is still an obvious “lack of societal glue” in BiH, the sort of “glue” that is provided by widespread trust, expectations of good will and a general consensus about why and how the constituent peoples and the “others” should share this land.

But society means far more than concord among national groups and the politicians that represent them. It also means crosscutting alliances and shared interests among social classes, professional associations, businesspeople, trades unions, students, sportsmen and so-called ordinary citizens.

This is what defines “civil society”. It is also why a vigorous, engaged and demanding civil society is so necessary. For the war destroyed more than lives and property. It also destroyed that “societal glue” – the hope and the sense of belonging that makes any country more than the sum of its administrative parts: the villages, cities, cantons, and entities from which it is constructed and the peoples and citizens who inhabit them.

Thanks to the hard work and patient endurance of BiH citizens – and a considerable amount of international guidance and

assistance – the basic reconstruction and state building have been done.

But giving life to those structures and ensuring that the majority of people accept them and believe in them remains to be done. This is the work of a strong civil society – and Bosnia and Herzegovina needs it very badly.

It is civil society that can support reconciliation, help restore trust and promote tolerance among both individuals and national groups, so making the peace sustainable and the common state legitimate in the eyes – and hearts – of all its citizens.

Thus, the establishment, growth and mediation of civil society are not just optional extras or desirable developments. They are central to the wellbeing of every democratic polity and society.

Given the challenges that lie ahead, including the adoption of a functional and affordable constitutional structure with which all of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens and peoples can identify, this country's nascent civil society has an enormous task ahead of it: not only to help reform the state, but also to recreate society.

As we have been seeing over the past year, forging the consensus required to reform state structures is hard enough; but building a well-developed (civil) society is harder still. In fact, it is probably the toughest part of peace implementation.

I believe that the apathy, passivity, cynicism and hopelessness that prevail among far too many in this country can only be countered and overcome by creating a strong coalition among non-governmental organizations, the media, academic institutions and every other association or expression of civilian engagement and civil discourse. The international community can and must play its part, but no

such complex and fundamental endeavor can be mounted, let alone succeed, unless it is the common will of BiH's citizens.

I hope and trust that they will take up this challenge.

Thank you.

* [“Examples of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sustainable Concepts or Sidetracks of the International Community?”](#), organized by the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Sarajevo, 17 April 2007