Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Europe’s Doors are Open”

Twelve years after the end of World War Two – building on agreements made by shattered countries to improve their prospects by cooperating in the production and distribution of necessary but scarce materials (including coal and steel) –Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and The Netherlands signed the Treaty of Rome, establishing the European Economic Community.

The three core elements of this new association are all contained in its title. The EEC was a geographically logical grouping of neighbouring states; it was built on economic necessity and interdependence, and, from the very beginning, it was designed to foster common goals, the most notable of which were prosperity and security. The EEC was a practical and hard-headed proposition conceived in difficult times and brought to maturity over the course of two generations, during which it overcame new challenges and made the most of new opportunities.

Half a century on, I believe the signatories to the Treaty of Rome would stand amazed at just how successful the process they set in motion has been. Europe has prospered beyond the wildest imaginings of anyone in 1957, and the geographical boundaries of market democracy have spread far beyond the six founding nations of the EEC.

Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to become a full-fledged member of this community of European states. It wants full integration in the European Union with access to all of the benefits that integration will bring.

Twelve years after the end of the conflict here, the peoples of this country face many of the challenges faced by the citizens of Europe in 1957. Had you asked people in Europe 50 years ago to describe their circumstances they might have given you answers ranging from “dire” through “difficult” to “desperate”. Those were hard times – and yet many of the underlying pillars of prosperity and security were already in place. People didn’t know it in 1957 but Europe had just embarked on what was to be the longest and steepest development curve in economic history. They were poor, but they were about to get rich.

Today, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the circumstances are difficult indeed. But much has been done to get the underlying framework for prosperity and security in place. Above all, the recent visit to Sarajevo of EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn pointed up one crucial fact – the European Union’s doors are open to Bosnia and Herzegovina . The European Union has marked out an accession path clearly, and it has assisted – and continues to assist – Bosnia and Herzegovina with active and detailed material, technical and political support so that it will be able to follow that path. But as Commissioner Rehn also noted, it is up to this country’s leaders to traverse that path.

Some people, including senior politicians, seem to believe that the project cannot succeed because of the disagreements, distrust and recrimination that have, unfortunately but understandably, been a continuing by-product of the war that ended a dozen years ago.

These people may be too young to remember the distrust and recrimination in the rest of Europe after the cataclysm of

1939 to 1945. I’m not. The Treaty of Rome was signed by leaders of governments that were struggling to keep their people fed, housed, clothed and in work. Europe was still bedevilled by the bitterness and dislocation spawned by the war. Germany , one of the signatories of the Treaty of Rome, was under military occupation. And one of the occupying powers was a fellow signatory of the Rome Treaty, France.

The statesmen who launched the EEC half a century ago were able to see beyond their immediate difficulties to the prospect of a prosperous and secure future. That’s what the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina have to do today, building on the progress that has been made since 1995.

The founders of the EEC responded to the massive – sometimes almost insurmountable – challenges facing them, with common sense, with enlightened self-interest, with imagination, and with optimism.

If the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina can start showing these qualities – and I believe that they can – this country can embark on the same kind of rapid development that was experienced by the European Union’s founding members in the 1960s and more recently and at even greater speed by the latest group of countries to join. History doesn’t just happen – it has to be made.

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