Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH:Stop holding Bosnia and Herzegovina hostage to “big issues”

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Bosnia and Herzegovina has “big issues” to deal with – post-war recovery and reconciliation, building a democracy, building a market economy, joining Europe.

When you have difficult tasks, you don’t go at them all at once and all in the same way. The sensible approach is to complete the tasks that can be completed straight away, and keep working on the other tasks until time and improved circumstances make it possible to finish them.

Only a child or perhaps a spoiled teenager would throw up his or her hands in a tantrum and complain that no problem can be solved because one particular problem cannot be solved. Yet for years political parties in this country have held sensible and necessary legislation hostage to “big issues”. Thwarted on a strategic objective that lacks consensus, they will – with no apparent thought for the possible negative impact on citizens – block progress on a tactical objective that has general support. Straightforward things that could be done today to improve the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are put off until next year, when more difficult and contentious things may – or may not – be accomplished.

We are now at a juncture where “big issues” abound in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is therefore imperative that cabinet ministers and their party colleagues understand that they cannot put everything on hold until the most difficult problems have been resolved.

The fall-out from the International Court of Justice verdict represents a challenge that Bosnia and Herzegovina, its peoples and citizens will have to deal with over a period of years. It cannot be addressed in a matter of days, and every other problem cannot be put on hold until this one is resolved.

Last year we came close to agreement on a package of constitutional reforms that would make the government and administration of Bosnia and Herzegovina more efficient and more consistent with European democratic and civic values. We believe that in the course of this year we can bridge the final, narrow gap separating the various strands of opinion and reach agreement that will benefit all citizens. We know that this is not going to happen tomorrow and we know that it is not going to happen without the consistent and constructive engagement of parties that must stay the course over months of negotiation. This problem cannot be resolved in matter of days – and every other problem cannot be put on hold until this one is solved.

When it comes to police reform, we are talking about days rather than weeks or months. If the parties fail to reach agreement by the middle of March the prospect of signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which is the first step on the road to EU membership and will allow the European Union to broaden and deepen its assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina, will slip over the horizon. The parties must focus on resolving their differences so that we can establish a police service in this country that has the capacity to fight crime and corruption effectively. But this does not mean that other urgent tasks should be put on hold in the meantime.

While political leaders must make progress on police reform and address other major issues, the Council of Ministers has to carry on with the day-to-day business of running the country. It must take effective action to get the country's infrastructure working, to resolve key questions affecting economic resources, to regulate the state's relations with religious communities, and a host of other tasks.

This week, the Council of Ministers failed to achieve anything. It is not, however, a mini parliament, but an executive body whose members are mandated – by law, by the electorate, and by common sense – to act as an effective executive group. And if agreement on one issue on the agenda cannot be reached, ministers should work to make progress on other issues, rather than postponing sessions.

It is time to stop holding sensible and necessary legislation hostage to "big issues", to rise to the challenge of ownership and to build a culture of compromise, pragmatism and respect for obligations entered into for the sake of future generations.

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