Article by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH “Time for ownership”

Time for ownership

Two opposite worldviews dominate the debate about the best way to tackle post-war situations – whether in the Balkans, in Afghanistan or Iraq. The first one encourages straightforward international intervention in domestic legislation to lay the foundations for democratic procedures and the rule of law. The second one puts its trust in local ownership when it comes to establishing a democratic political culture and an active civil society. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international community has put both approaches to the test over the past 11 years. The evidence suggests that success depends first and foremost on the right timing of each approach.

During the first post-war years, targeted international interventions were needed to implement the Dayton peace agreement and eliminate the worst consequences of the war. My predecessors rightly used their extraordinary powers to support war crimes investigations, the return of refugees and the rule of law.

Today, the time has come for a gradual transition to ownership. Even before taking up my current duties, I was convinced that the powers of my office should only be exercised with moderation and in extreme circumstances. My declared objective was to transfer responsibility to local politicians, whilst offering my good offices as a mediator and advisor. At the time of my appointment as High Representative,

this approach also reflected the unanimous views of the international guarantors of the peace agreement. With the end of the Dayton mandate in sight, it was important for the international community to adopt a less interventionist policy.

Unfortunately, not all stated objectives were reached over the past year. After a US-sponsored attempt to reform the Constitution was defeated in Parliament by only two votes, nationalist rhetoric during the election campaign put the reform process on ice for several months. As a result, I will recommend to the Peace Implementation Council, which meets at the end of this month in Brussels, to postpone the abolition of the Office of the High Representative, including its special powers, by one year. A time-limited extension of the Dayton mandate will allow us to deal with possible upheavals resulting from the Kosovo status decisions, and to take forward the reform process in the country with the necessary determination.

Following extensive talks in Washington, Moscow and EU capitals, I am confident that the international community will continue to put its trust in the concept of ownership to ensure durable stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and clear the country's path to the European Union.

The year 2007 has much potential for further progress. The newly appointed state-level government has revived talks on police reform, in an effort to meet the conditions for signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union. Over the coming months, we will also see a resumption of efforts to reform the country's Constitution. My first contacts with the new authorities have strengthened my conviction that there is a strong will on all sides to carry on with the reforms.

The international community now needs to act with a clear sense of purpose. The German EU Presidency has a special

responsibility in this respect. The return to an obsolete interventionist policy is doomed to failure. Only patience and strong international resolve will lead Bosnia Herzegovina into full ownership and pave its way to Europe.