

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH “Reforming for a European Future”



Reforming for a European Future

Two new flags are flying in front of the European Council in Brussels, those of Romania and Bulgaria, the two countries that joined the European Union on 1 January. EU membership is the realisation of a long-term political goal for both countries – a goal which most of their citizens view as a guarantee of future peace and prosperity. This milestone in two nearby states should also act as a spur to the politicians and citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to carry out the reforms necessary for this country to follow rapidly along the same path.

Over the past decade, the European Union has honed mechanisms – applied in the course of pre-accession negotiations – that help countries prepare themselves for membership. In day-to-day terms this process is unspectacular, dealing for the most part with the business of meeting specified standards and drafting laws or adapting existing legislation to bring the country into in line with European norms. However, over several years, the process can transform a society.

Integration has had a profound impact on all the countries that today make up the European Union and it has helped create unparalleled peace, prosperity, and opportunity. Those of us who experienced Europe's darkest days and have since lived long enough to see the European Union grow to include

countries that used to be part of the Eastern Bloc understand how far and how fast societies can move when they are on the right track.

The reforms that Bosnia and Herzegovina is being urged to make will deliver real benefits. If fundamental changes are successfully introduced in the economy, the judiciary, the police service, the armed forces, the public broadcasting system and elsewhere, so as to meet EU standards, the people of this country can expect to reap the kind of benefits that citizens of the European Union already enjoy. Substantial and sustained economic growth is conspicuous among these benefits.

This is by no means a distant prospect. The experience of both old and new EU member states shows that prosperity can follow reform remarkably quickly.

Germany's GDP rose by two thirds between 1950 and 1960. Six million jobs were created in the same decade. The other EU founding states experienced similar, spectacular growth in the 1950s and 1960s. These states all pursued policies designed to encourage commercial investment, and they focused public spending on infrastructure improvements that would encourage trade and industrial development.

That was half a century ago. There are equally compelling but more recent success stories. In the early 1970s, Ireland was one of the poorest countries in Europe. By the late-1990s, it was one of the richest.

This was not achieved by accident. Successive Irish governments pursued a single-minded policy of upgrading the business environment and infrastructure, opening the economy to international investment and investing in vocational and higher education so that there would be a well-educated workforce in whom international investors could have confidence.

Ireland is a small country on the periphery of Europe. The

island as a whole is home to two distinct communities whose interdependency has been by turns creative and problematic. Ireland has few natural resources, other than spectacular beauty and now some of Europe's best-educated people.

The Irish economic miracle began with the reforms that were an EU accession requirement and gathered momentum as EU funds were poured into modernising the country's infrastructure, followed in turn by huge inflows of European and US investment. This is model that Bulgaria and Romania are now utilising – and one that Bosnia and Herzegovina can utilise as well.

The experience of Ireland and other countries that have joined the European Union over the years, including Greece, Portugal and Spain, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that joined in 2004, and now Bulgaria and Romania, shows conclusively that societies can make enormous progress within a very short time.

This country too can make rapid progress and have its own economic miracle.

But this will only come to pass, if Bosnia and Herzegovina's elected representatives use the coming months to focus on the reform agenda and secure a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, the first rung on the ladder to eventual membership.

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