

Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: "Giving Politicians a Hard Time"

Switch on the radio or television, open any newspaper and it's near impossible to avoid hearing politicians either promising all manner of things or bickering with one another. The electoral campaign is in full swing and political rhetoric dominates the media. But who should one vote for, or rather how best to use one's vote?

I have often heard, both here and in Germany, that all politicians are the same, that they behave as if they are above the law and that therefore voting makes little difference. As a seasoned politician, I cannot accept this. Rather, I believe that there are fundamental differences between individuals and parties and that it is during an election campaign that we can and should identify such differences in order to make our choices.

Rhetoric is the stock in trade of any candidate for office and I'm not surprised that politicians come to television debates and interviews armed with slogans and a handful of attractive propositions. Yet the substance of election campaigns is not rhetoric but concrete proposals for solving key problems. Politicians have to be made to explain in detail not just what they plan to do but also how they plan to do it. Otherwise, election campaigning is liable to degenerate into slick generalisations or tired catch phrases.

Voters want solutions to problems, not time-wasting fantasies. The quality of political debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina between now and 1 October will determine the prospects of this country and its people for the next four years and beyond. It should not degenerate into empty rhetoric.

Empty rhetoric has been the scourge of this country for much too long. You cannot eat rhetoric; it doesn't create jobs; it doesn't staff schools or equip hospitals; and it won't secure visa-free travel to the European Union.

There are three things that make life in Bosnia and Herzegovina intolerably hard. These are poverty, criminality and senseless bureaucracy. Any politician who doesn't understand this is out of touch with his or her fellow citizens. Concrete proposals are the only basis for developing solutions to poverty, crime and the other scourges that confront all citizens of this country.

In the next four weeks I hope that politicians will be obliged – by one another, by television interviewers and newspaper journalists, and, when they venture out to meet citizens, by voters themselves – to explain exactly *how* they are going to raise living standards, *what* steps they propose to take in order to attract investment and create jobs, *where* they will find extra money to spend on schools and hospitals, and *what* they will do to secure EU and NATO membership.

Being *for* all of these desirable things isn't the same as knowing how to deliver them to voters.

And anyone arguing *against* say, EU and NATO membership, must also provide a plausible alternative for the security of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Candidates who are able to respond convincingly to these straightforward questions might also usefully be asked to explain their party's voting record on recent legislation that would have made life better for all citizens of this country but didn't reach the statute books – the Higher Education Law, which would have given students from this country real possibilities of studying in Europe; the Law on Obligations, which would have helped attract investment and create jobs; the Law on National Fiscal Council, which would have given Bosnia and Herzegovina access to international loans for infrastructure investment.

Candidates now running for office found reasons to vote against these and other laws that would have helped solve major problems. They need to be held to account, to justify past actions and explain precisely how they intend to deliver on their current promises. An election campaign is the time when politicians are obliged to listen. It is now that they must be given a hard time and made to answer.