

The High Representative's New Year's Message to the Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina

On the threshold of a New Year we are filled with hope for the coming year, and we also have the chance to look back over the past 12 months. For me, this is my last New Year's Address as the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The past year not only brought Bosnia and Herzegovina and its two neighbouring countries Croatia and Yugoslavia closer in a spirit of co-operation, it also saw the man, who unleashed the violent beast of nationalism in former Yugoslavia stand before the judges in The Hague. With a new chapter in the history of the region opened at the end of 2000, a year later we seem to have come full circle and the way ahead towards European integration lies wide open.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina thousands of people have again seen the promise of return come true, although they were once violently driven from their homes. I visited countless towns and villages all across the country and the meetings that made the deepest impression on me were those I had with determined returnees. They have my utmost respect, and I can ensure these people, as well as those who still want to return, of my unwavering support in the year to come. Already, the recent changes in the property laws will move things further and facilitate even faster and less bureaucratic return of people's property.

I was also pleased by the changes we saw in the various levels of government following the elections. Bosnia and Herzegovina now has a political leadership that wants to assume responsibility for the future of the whole country, instead of endlessly repeating tired old nationalist slogans. Reflecting on this, the International Community has defined a new relation of partnership with the new authorities and we are working together on solutions for the difficult tasks still lying ahead. The economy will need to become more dynamic and liberal in order to develop faster and maintain-sustainable growth. In the coming year I expect yet greater progress in the economic field and further professionalisation in the work of the State Institutions.

This is what we owe to the many jobless people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the pensioners and the youth, who rely on the economic success. I receive letters from citizens every day, telling me of their problems – problems related to return, to the inefficient legal and administrative system, and to other aspects of everyday life. I cannot answer to all your concerns and I cannot bring about changes for their life from one day to another. But one thing unites them and me: We both want a democratic Bosnia and Herzegovina serving and protecting all its citizens.

Improving the lives of the citizens is an obligation that I will continue to work on hard to fulfil, and I expect my partners in the domestic leadership to do the same. The International Community and the new leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina have embarked together to take on the challenges and concerns of the people in a spirit of partnership. That responsibility will be handed over to the authorities of this country. The momentum we have gathered will help carry us forward and enable the people of this country to take ownership of its future. This has become all the more apparent after the terrible events of September 11. The attention of the International Community has been drawn elsewhere and Bosnia and Herzegovina will have to stand on its own feet.

The biggest test in the coming year will be the implementation of the Constitutional Court's historic 2000 decision ensuring equality for all peoples across Bosnia and Herzegovina. I expect its full implementation in the spirit and substance of the Constitutional Court's decision on the Constituency of Peoples.

Any solution, any constitutional change in the two Entities, will inevitably require hard-won consensus and genuine,

democratic compromise among the politicians of this country. This is an absolute necessity for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multiethnic state, which relies and will always rely on the principle of power-sharing and democratic compromise. The representatives you voted for, those in government and in opposition, must prove to you that you made a good choice, and that they together find the best possible solution in order to ensure the equality of peoples. This calls for symmetry in principle of the constitutional set-up of the two Entities.

Specific set-ups might be different in the Federation and the RS, but what is essential? It is essential that the constitutional rights of the people are fully established and protected – the right to be an equal citizen in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Possible solutions have now been debated for nearly a year. I provided the politicians with the necessary framework – the Constitutional Commissions. Now, it is up to the politicians again to show leadership towards their people, their country, and the world by finding domestic solutions – such as in the case of the Election Law –, thus proving that they are ready to take on the future in a spirit of ownership. I can assure you that I will follow this process very closely and offer all the assistance and advice possible.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is scheduled to join the Council of Europe in the beginning of this year. It has paved its own path towards Europe in the course of the last year by implementing the necessary reforms, first and foremost a new Election Law. The accession to the Council of Europe should help bring about a boost in tackling outstanding human rights issues and enhancing the rule of law.

The Council of Europe is only a first step towards the integration into the European family of states. The next one, the “EU Road Map” still lies ahead of us. Some requirements have been met. The majority is still outstanding. Only by passing the necessary laws urgently, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be able to conclude an Association and Stabilisation Agreement with the EU, ensuring widely improved trade relations, financial assistance and economic co-operation, thus opening the door for more investment and the door to the European Union.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the road to becoming a normal European state. The upcoming elections in 2002 should bring about a consolidation of the democratic and progressive forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Let us move forward on this road and with confidence into the New Year!

I wish you all a happy, peaceful and prosperous 2002.