Article by Alexandra Stiglmayer in Ljiljan: "Things are changing"

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The High Representative is getting ready for his last year in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One thing is clear: This year will not just be a continuation of the previous two during which he rather robustly and successfully worked on his three strategic priorities – refugee return, a strengthening of the state institutions, and economic reform – dismissing or suspending 66 officials and issuing 93 other Decisions, of which many were impositions of important laws.

The coming year will differ as the circumstances have changed: Bosnia and Herzegovina has, for the first time since the war, largely non-nationalist and reform-oriented governments at the state and Federation levels, which want to take the fate of this country into their own hands, and in Republika Srpska a government that if nothing else puts an emphasis on economic recovery. Secondly, it is surrounded by neighbor countries that have started actively supporting the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Thirdly, foreign aid for BiH is once again dramatically dropping.

At the Steering Board meeting to be held in Brussels on September 12 and 13, its eleven members (France, Italy, Japan, Canada, Germany, Russia, United States of America, great Britain, the presidency of the European Union presently chaired by Belgium, the European Commission, and the Organization of the Islamic conference represented by Turkey) will start discussions on what to do in the forthcoming period. Whatever they will decide in the end, two parameters of the future international engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina could easily be identified: There will be less money, even for important things such as the reconstruction of destroyed housing and less money for economic revitalization. In addition, the international community will carefully select the issues to put their efforts into.

As a result of this, the "ownership concept", the concept of the self-responsibility of the officials and citizens of BiH for their country and their future, which the High Representative has advocated since he took up this post in Bosnia and Herzegovina in August 1999, will inevitably become reality. Of course, the international community will continue to deal with crucial issues, such as further strengthening of the state institutions, continued support to refugee return and the implementation of the property laws, the establishment of an independent and efficient police and judiciary, and structural economic reforms. However, the primary responsibility for day-to-day problems and the implementation of the Dayton Agreement will be with the elected officials of BiH, who have made the Brussels Declaration of the Peace Implementation Council part of their platform.

This constitutes a big change as it was largely the international community that was driving Bosnia and Herzegovina's return to normalcy and the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement since 1995. This shift is difficult for everybody – like changes of roles always are. However, they can be managed if both sides improve their communication, reach agreements and then really stick to them. In this context, the Consultative Partnership Forum and the Civic Forum, which the High Representative has initiated, will be very important tools of exchange of opinion and discussion.

Over time, the role of the international organizations operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina will become smaller and smaller, which is good because the ultimate goal is a self-sustaining, stable and peaceful country. That of course does not mean that the international community will abandon BiH. As international representatives will be leaving BiH, it will be becoming deeper embedded in European structures, which will provide it with new stability. But this is, of course, future music. The task now is to get used to a new phase in the process of peace implementation.