

Remarks by High Representative Valentin Inzko to the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Mister Chairman, Minister Crnadak, committee members, ladies and gentlemen,

We should be honest about the scale of the challenges and tackle them head on. Because while the circumstances in the region and in Bosnia and Herzegovina have changed dramatically from the 1990s, threats to stability still exist.

At the base of these threats we find the divisive politics of political party kleptocracies, a situation that is absolutely not conducive for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we know that leaders of some political parties are just maintaining power and privilege.

And while recognizing that this basic financial motive for some politicians is the source of the problem, we also see that what has grown from it is something far more threatening to stability: a creeping, frequently silent, fracturing of the country along ethnic lines.

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In stressing these trends, I do not want to minimize the significance of Bosnia and Herzegovina's recent progress on its EU path. Rather the opposite, the progress is indeed remarkable and we have heard here that the year 2016 was very successful. If we speak about Bosnia and Herzegovina's future, I would recommend my short formula: early candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina and late membership when the conditions are met. Because, in a way, when you have the candidate status you are in the waiting room of the European Union. I would equally strongly advocate for the Membership Action Plan which should be triggered so that Bosnia and Herzegovina would also be in the waiting room for NATO. We have full support of all three constituent peoples for this policy.

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My own views are shaped by my experience over the last eight years serving as the High Representative. They are based on what has been happening over the long term, not just the last few months.

To begin with, secessionist rhetoric and calls for new forms of division in the country have become almost the norm. And divisive issues still prevail over forward looking ones, like EU integration.

For some politicians, and there are a few, the goals of the war that started 25 years ago, almost on this date, remain the same.

On all sides, the rule of law is trampled when it doesn't suit politicians, with judicial decisions ignored and even rejected, and direct pressure exerted on individual cases.

Citizens' rights are systematically denied. In Mostar, citizens have been unable to elect local officials for over eight years. More than seven years after the Sejdic-Finci ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, some citizens are still denied the basic right to stand for public office on the basis of ethnicity.

And the recent controversy about the possible revision of Bosnia and Herzegovina's lawsuit against Serbia before the International Criminal Court revealed how quickly the Presidency and other institutions can become hamstrung over divisive questions.

At the same time, political forces have been proactive when it comes to backward looking policies. The trend in schools is towards denying the rights of numerically smaller groups to their language and identity, and increasing ethnic segregation.

We have Croat and Bosniak secondary school pupils in Jajce protesting against a concerted effort by the adults to segregate their school. They understand the disastrous consequences for the future of the country.

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are also concerned, and many thousands of them are leaving, while foreign investment has declined.

All of this stands in such sharp contrast to where Bosnia and Herzegovina stood in 2006. Then the country was full of confidence and optimism after major structural reforms in areas such as defence, intelligence and indirect taxation, state symbols, Border Police etc.

At that time the international community was prepared to push for ambitious changes and the BiH political class was convinced that political courage and positive leadership was worthwhile.

My conclusion today is that some politicians believe that the international community is getting ever weaker and that if they just hang on they can wait us out and finally become untouchable.

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In this context, the international community, foremost the European Union, needs to stay the course in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and indeed intensify and accelerate its efforts. We need to inject a sense of urgency into Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Europe has an interest in the strategic reengagement needed to turn things around in Bosnia and Herzegovina for several reasons:

First, Bosnia and Herzegovina is undoubtedly the fulcrum of a peaceful and prosperous Western Balkans, so essential to Europe's own long-term stability.

This is something which Serbia's recently elected President Vucic understands well. The EU should make the most of the positive momentum generated by Serbia's decisive moves towards the EU and its basic values of integration and cooperation. Equally, Prime Minister Plenkovic of Croatia is a strong and staunch defender of stability in the region, and he has offered his helping hand repeatedly to Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially as far as the enlargement process is concerned.

Second, Bosnia and Herzegovina, like Europe itself, is a multi-confessional and multiethnic community. Safeguarding this, by advancing integration, reconciliation and tolerance, is about upholding the European way of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Third, given the mistakes that we as the EU have made in the past, which contributed to the tragic events in the former Yugoslavia, we have a moral duty to complete our mission and also prove what we can achieve when we are true to our values.

And finally, succeeding in Bosnia and Herzegovina will send a clear signal to others that the country has made the right choice about strategic priorities, by asserting its rightful place within the EU family of nations.

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As we mark the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty, let us remember where Europe stood after the Second World War, and remind ourselves what the EU is really about: peace, stability and prosperity through integration.

Our Euro-Atlantic vision – a vision that is shared by the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina – has competition. We must stop assuming that just because we are right everything will eventually fall into place.

To succeed again we need a renewed engagement that confronts serious challenges and prioritizes genuine reintegration and reforms that go deep enough to transform Bosnia and Herzegovina into a modern, functional and prosperous state. When I say functional, I do not mean centralized. I want to be clear about that. But it must be a functional state.

I have optimism for one simple reason: We achieved unimaginable successes in Bosnia and Herzegovina before when we were committed and ambitious. If we are again truly committed and genuinely ambitious, once again we can achieve amazing results.

Thank you