

Op-ed by HR Valentin Inzko: Not Enough Has Been Done with 22 Years of Peace

Twenty-two years ago this week, an agreement was reached among the parties negotiating at Dayton to end the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Peace Accords were signed in Paris a month later.

The limitations of the arrangements reached at Dayton are often cited, and sometimes with good reason. However, I wish to highlight two of the ways in which Dayton has made and continues to make an essential contribution.

The first and most important thing to remember is that it has kept the peace.

We should never forget this, also considering all the conflicts worldwide.

The second thing to emphasize is that, during the first decade after its signing and implementation, progress was made in rebuilding the country and its institutions, and in reintegrating its peoples.

And if it happened before, it can happen again.

I was an ambassador here at that time and I remember the speed and urgency with which much of this work was done, and how many useful things were accomplished. The Central Bank was established, along with a stable currency; Bosnia-Herzegovina introduced the most efficient indirect taxation system in Europe; the joint armed forces and other key agencies were established; the police and judiciary were reformed, common license plates were introduced along with a single passport. These are just a few examples.

But, as we all know, just as these major changes were beginning to deliver positive results – Bosnia-Herzegovina was at one point the fastest growing economy in Southeast Europe – progress came to a standstill.

This wasn't because the international community stopped providing political or financial support. The European Union, for example, continues to offer tens of millions of Euros annually to assist projects across a wide spectrum, from infrastructure development to veterinary management.

Even more importantly, the European Union is now offering Bosnia and Herzegovina the chance to move formally and decisively closer to the Union, which will bring significant benefits in terms of economic prosperity and political stability.

The truth is that progress has stopped because some political leaders have lost the will and the ambition to transform this country into a prosperous democracy.

The unfortunate truth is that, 22 years after Dayton, some politicians irresponsibly speak of possible secession of a part of the country's territory. A few others mention a war, albeit hypothetically. Such rhetoric should simply disappear into history, not return into the present.

It is also unbelievable that, instead of working together for the benefit of all the citizens and future generations of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a segment of the political establishment focuses on blocking the work of the institutions.

The rule of law is a foundation of every successful, democratic society. Without the rule of law, improvements are simply not possible. That is why it is of crucial importance that the elected authorities take concrete measures to strengthen the rule of law and begin decisively fighting corruption.

Politicians should stop undermining and refrain from attempts to control the judicial institutions, and instead should reinforce these institutions and respect their decisions. The officials in these institutions should work independently and professionally, committed to the highest standards.

I admire the ordinary citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Looking at their talents and invincible spirit, I strongly believe that they deserve better: better salaries and pensions, better elementary and secondary schools and universities, better health and other services – in short, a better and realistic perspective.

These things and more can be achieved when political leaders look for ways to reach compromise and for ways to make the institutions work more efficiently and effectively.

Conversely, when they block or undermine the parliament and the courts, when they violate the Peace Agreement and offer false promises of secession, which will never come true... When they do these things instead of governing, then the country and its people – Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, citizens and Others – are prevented from reaching their full potential.

2018 is an election year in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and some political parties have clearly already begun taking decisions with the elections in mind. Other political parties are already avoiding taking any kind of political responsibility. One year before an election, such behaviour is inappropriate, to say the least. There is more than enough time to campaign, but time for much-needed reforms is running out. This is not the time to suspend or stop reforms, but the best time to accelerate them.