

Address by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko At a Conference on Perspectives of European Policy Towards Bosnia and Herzegovina Organised by the Centre for Policy and Governance and the Heinrich Boll Foundation



Citizens Must Reject another Year of Hardship

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's roundtable is the first event in the Centre for Policy and Governance and the Heinrich Boll Foundation's EUROAD initiative.

The name of the initiative is pertinent – because the vast majority of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a common desire, and that is to move along the road to the European

Union.

But that road is blocked.

This is dangerous – for the people of this country and for the people of southeast Europe.

In the long run it is dangerous for the people of Europe as a whole.

And that is why, right now, the entire thrust of our policy – the international community working with BiH stakeholders – is to find a way around the obstacles that have been placed on the path to Europe.

Let me say at the outset that I believe these obstacles *can* be removed and I believe they can be removed *this year* – I do not accept, and I do not believe anyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina should accept the argument that nothing can be done in 2010 because there is an election in October.

It is astonishing – but some people do not seem to understand that we cannot simply sit back and watch citizens being made to endure another year of economic catastrophe and rising poverty.

Politicians are arguing that their hands are tied because if they take difficult steps they will lose votes in October.

This simply does not stand up to rational scrutiny.

The opposite is true.

Leaders who show that they can act effectively to address the causes of Bosnia and Herzegovina's misery will *win* votes not lose them.

Another statement that is often repeated is that the European Union no longer has an appetite for enlargement, and that because of this Brussels is placing obstacles in the way of

Bosnia and Herzegovina, raising the bar, applying stricter criteria and so on.

This too is false.

And all of the evidence shows that it is false.

Since the summits in Zagreb a decade ago and Thessaloniki three years later, EU policy has been focused on helping the countries of the Western Balkans move towards full membership.

This focus has been backed by a prodigious amount of political, financial and technical support. Over the next two years alone, EU assistance for Bosnia and Herzegovina is worth almost 400 million Euros. This is in addition to the military and other personnel deployed in the country to help implement Dayton.

The path towards Europe is clearly defined in the European Partnership and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The reforms along this path are not arbitrary – they are steps that have brought stability and prosperity to the EU, and that have delivered rapid improvements in living standards among new member states.

And finally, the 27 EU member states managed to agree on and adopt Lisbon treaty which provided institutional preconditions for future enlargements.

The obstacles that have been placed on the BiH EU path have not been placed there by the EU. They are on the BiH side , and BiH has to deal with them. That's why mobilising the popular support that will get Bosnia and Herzegovina back onto the road to Europe is so important.

Citizens for Europe

I am particularly pleased to participate in today's conference

because it is part of an initiative designed to bring civil society actors to the centre of political debate.

As you may know, my office and the Swedish Development Agency are working with BiH civil society groups through the Citizens for Europe initiative, to organize events around the country at which citizens will be able to sit down with representatives of political parties and discuss concrete issues related to the BiH accession path .

The first debate was held on 10 February, and there will be another eleven before September, offering a valuable forum at which the parties' proposals for implementing the EU integration agenda can be examined in detail and in public.

The aims of this initiative are, I believe, very similar to the aims of EUROAD and I hope that we can achieve a useful synergy by mobilizing complementary elements in the civil society and NGO sector to raise standards of political debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina and make politics more constructive, more effective and more focused on benefits which EU integration process brings to the citizens of this country.

This is not simply a pious aspiration but an absolute political imperative – because, left to its own devices, the political establishment has shown that it cannot resolve major challenges.

The fiscal crisis facing the Federation is an example of political as well as economic failure.

And the economic crisis that has destroyed jobs in every part of the country is a direct consequence of the fact that the reforms that could improve the business environment, attract investment and create jobs have been brought to a dead stop for political reasons.

Making civil society impossible to ignore

If we are to change this we must look candidly at how we got into the predicament we are in.

A large part of the problem is the position of civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina – trades unionists, human rights campaigners, representatives of youth groups and religious organizations, business federations, professional associations, artists and musicians, writers and NGO activists.

All of these people are ignored by the political elite.

I suppose activists may take some comfort – but not very much – from the fact that they are not alone. The same political elite ignores *most* citizens.

Perhaps the single most astonishing thing about the present crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that politicians seem to carry on doing business with complete indifference to the disasters that surround them.

In 2009, 70,000 jobs were lost, yet the parties still refuse to enact legislation that would create jobs.

Young people are forced to study at underfunded schools and corrupt universities, yet the parties still refuse to enact legislation that would help bring BiH education up to European standards.

Hundreds of thousands of citizens go without adequate healthcare and eke out a living on a few hundred marks a month, yet the parties still refuse to adjust budget allocations so that those in greatest need will receive at least some of the assistance to which they are entitled.

How can we end this disastrous insensitivity to other people's pain?

By making politicians pay a price for failure.

How can this be done?

Well, this is the very question that EUROAD and Citizens for Europe and similar initiatives can usefully address.

The plain fact is that activists will continue to be ignored unless they play hard ball.

We will do a great service to this country by helping NGOs negotiate and lobby more effectively.

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are suffering because of the absence of reform – this fact must be publicized so that every single citizen in the country is aware of it.

The road to Europe has been blocked because of the absence of reform – this fact must be publicized so that every single citizen is aware of it.

The European Union isn't to blame.

And the election at the end of the year isn't to be used as an excuse.

Ten or twenty or thirty examples of miraculous political will

When citizens of this country, media, and civil society organizations in general, managed to clearly and strongly demand visa free travel, the political class managed to implement the measures necessary to secure visa-free travel, despite their differences. It happened with an unnecessary delay, but the political class showed that it *can* muster the will to act on behalf of the people when confronted with a strong demand.

However, you can't travel to Europe if you have no money because you've been thrown out of work, or because the job

you've been able to find is so badly paid that traveling inside Bosnia and Herzegovina makes a dent in the family budget, never mind visiting another country.

We need ten or twenty or thirty examples of strong EU integration related demands of BiH citizens so the political will miraculously materializes, as in the case of visa-liberalisation.

What about the other reforms – the ones that will attract investment and create jobs; the ones that will refurbish the education system and the health system and the pension system and the physical infrastructure?

If the political class is seriously planning to go to the electorate in October having done nothing about these issues for four years, then they should be made to pay a price.

If they know that the price will be high, they will deliver reforms in the next seven months. Visa-free travel is a good start, but it's a fraction of what needs to be done – and a fraction of what can be done this year.

They won't act unless they are forced to.

Citizens must learn the techniques that will compel their leaders to keep their promises.

I hope that this conference will help develop some of these techniques and that many of them can be put into practice – and to good effect – before October.

Thank you