

Article by Chris Bennett, OHR / EUSR Director of Communications”In Bosnia, a hands-off approach is better”



In Bosnia, a hands-off approach is better

Rather than depend on outside intervention, the country must govern itself, says Chris Bennett

Ian Traynor wrote: “The sense of destabilising crisis gathering over former Yugoslavia intensified last night when the German official in charge of running Bosnia abruptly announced he was resigning” ([German Bosnia chief ‘fired’ after just a year](#) , January 24). He went on to cite Senad Slatina, a Sarajevo analyst, claiming that Christian Schwarz-Schilling had been the “worst of the high representatives running Bosnia” and alleging that he had in fact been sacked for his “lack of energy and attentiveness”.

Mr Schwarz-Schilling has not resigned and will not resign. He has announced that he will step down at the end of his mandate in June. He made this decision following his meeting with Chancellor Merkel on January 11 to give the international community maximum time to determine the way forward for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s post-war recovery and Euro-Atlantic

integration. As he explained when briefing reporters on his decision not to seek a renewal of his mandate: "What matters is the future of Bosnia, not that of myself as an individual."

Mr Schwarz-Schilling believes in local ownership, empowering Bosnia's institutions and leaders to take responsibility for their country's future. Critics, such as Slatina, believe that the high representative must be interventionist, sacking officials and imposing reforms. The country is now in difficulties, ethnic tensions are growing and the reform process has stalled, they argue, because he has not been using his powers.

It is tempting to intervene when things appear to be going badly, to give the impression of progress. But that would be a false impression. It takes courage not to intervene under such circumstances. Mr Schwarz-Schilling has chosen not to intervene because he believes that the institutions and leaders of Bosnia have to develop their own capabilities for governing. The most irresponsible policy would be one of continuous intervention until the day the office he heads closes and the extraordinary powers he possesses are no more. Mr Schwarz-Schilling has stood firm in addressing the long-term reality and avoiding short-term fixes.

By giving the institutions and leaders of Bosnia the opportunity to take responsibility for their own future, Mr Schwarz-Schilling has made it possible to form an accurate assessment of conditions in the country. Only by determining what works and what doesn't, is it possible to design the appropriate instruments and policies to assist Bosnia's development.

Moreover, there have been positive results during the past year – the introduction and implementation of VAT, defence reforms and membership of Nato's Partnership for Peace, trade negotiations and Central European Free Trade Agreement membership, and the holding of elections and government

formation with minimal international intervention – for which the local authorities deserve credit.

Although Mr Schwarz-Schilling's critics are crowing, they will be disappointed by the next high representative, who will take over where Mr Schwarz-Schilling left off. There will be no return to interventionism.

Chris Bennett is communications director of the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.