

Op-ed by HR Valentin Inzko: Responsibility, trust, perseverance

I would like to share with your readers and all the citizens of BiH some thoughts regarding these challenging times. On this occasion, I address you not as the High Representative, but as one of you. In my lengthy diplomatic career, I have lived in many different places on three continents and had many different experiences. But in my 71 years, I have never seen anything similar to the current health crisis. However, we have to stick to the words of the Austro-British Philosopher Karl Popper: "Life is problem-solving!"

Mankind perceives life as a living thing, in constant motion. There is a Latin phrase, *Perpetuum mobile* – perpetual motion. The impression these days is that the world has stopped moving, and there is nothing we can do about it. Suddenly, all of us – individuals, society, the whole of civilization – seem to appear helpless, especially the elderly.

But it is not entirely true. What we are experiencing is a controlled shutdown, based on the informed decisions of our governments. There is a logic behind it, a formula to prioritize lives over the economy, but also to safeguard economies as much as possible. In fact, it is a necessary measure to prevent us from becoming truly helpless and surrendering. In this trying times, good old neighbourhood and neighbourly help should not be forgotten, it should be cherished.

Pending a cure or a vaccine against COVID-19, most European countries have turned to the oldest and most proven approach to halt the spread of disease: quarantine, isolation and social distancing. This has led to the widespread shutdown of

institutions, the limiting of services and production, regardless of whether we are speaking about rich or less developed countries. It seems to have happened in the blink of an eye, which understandably raises concerns and even fear, regardless of how rational and justified the decisions actually are.

In such extreme situations, which seem contrary to our nature as an extremely social species, some might become doubtful, impatient, and even rebellious. This situation can bring about the worst in people, but also the best.

This is never more important to keep in mind, as many of us have suddenly been forced to turn away from the world outside and become accustomed to the "e-World." Many of us are now working and communicating exclusively online. My office is no exception. The so-called "e-World" is, however, overloaded with information. Some of it is accurate, some of it is false. Too much of it is subject to opinion. We must take care not to allow ideology and doctrine to overcome facts.

In these circumstances, we must recall the basics of democracy.

A government has a responsibility to lead. This means taking public opinion into account but also being fearless in making unpopular, but correct and informed decisions. Government policies must be judged based on objective criteria, on expertise and science. And more than ever, there is a need for functional authorities.

Political opposition has the responsibility to oversee government policies, to criticize as necessary, to propose alternative solutions, but also to support whatever is constructive. In times of crisis, there can be no opposition to good solutions. There must be unity.

This is also true for non-governmental organizations and the media. Above all, the media has the responsibility to

objectively inform the public, and must not be the instrument of any political party or private interest.

These are some of the crucial pillars of democracy.

In such crises as now, citizens must place their trust in governments and follow their instructions. But this is a two-way street. Governments must protect the people, fighting the virus and preserving the economy, while also respecting and protecting civil liberties and democratic values.

Politicians have no option but to set aside their differences and work together. It is not possible to fight the virus and preserve the economy while pursuing incompatible ideologies and positions, and failing to coordinate. Now is not the time for populism. It is time for expertise and facts.

As you can see, I have refrained from mentioning this country, this beautiful Bosnia and Herzegovina. What I have written could be applied in almost any country right now. There is pessimism, even amongst the citizens of this country, to view Bosnia and Herzegovina as somehow lagging behind, but in this crisis, the country stands with the rest of the world. Regardless of certain perceived shortcomings, this crisis should remind us that we are all interconnected. We are all sharing a common experience, and we will get through it together. Ultimately, everything will be fine.

It is true that exceptional situation justifies extraordinary measures, but they should not exceed what the situation calls for. Also, they should only last as long as the crisis endures.

For sure, fighting the pandemic is a priority, but authorities have to make sure that all the measures they undertake are transparent, balanced and proportional, and in line with the constitutional framework. That is how once all of this is behind us, our lives, freedoms and societies will not suffer long term impacts.

The rule of law must be the guiding principle, even in a state of emergency. Citizens must be assured that their human rights and fundamental freedoms, as guaranteed by the BiH Constitution, will remain intact.

The way we behave and act today, all of us, will influence how we live when the crisis is over. Today we must trust the system we have, including the authorities and the experts, who are doing their best to fight the virus. However, we can also continue to demand better.

Let me conclude with the words of Winston Churchill: "It is no use saying 'we are doing our best.' You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary." If we are disciplined, if we are strict in social distancing, if we respect the constructive measures of authorities based on expert opinion, I am sure that together we can manage the situation. We can and must persevere. And when this crisis inevitably comes to an end, we will be a better society!