Remarks by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko At a Panel Discussion on Political Aspects of Joining the European Union, During the Conference on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Path to EU Membership, Organised by the BiH PanEuropean Union

Leave the Blind Alley

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not believe I have to list the political steps that Bosnia and Herzegovina must take in order to move to the next stage of European Union integration, which is submitting a formal membership application.

The steps are well known to everyone. They are laid out in

detail in the European Partnership and in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

But these steps have not been taken in recent years because this country's leaders have – by accident or by design – marched down a blind alley.

One constituency has repeatedly challenged the authority and competence of the state – although it is the state, and not the entities, that will secure EU membership. And another constituency has conspicuously failed to build the countrywide consensus that must underpin EU integration reforms.

As a result – apart from those measures that were absolutely unavoidable because without them signing the SAA or securing visa-free travel would have been completely out of the question – in four years almost none of the integration agenda has been implemented.

So, the political aspect of this country's effort to join the European Union is rather straightforward.

Its leaders have to come out of the blind alley they are currently in.

They have to decide whether or not they want to respect the wishes of more than 80 percent of the electorate and return to the European path and begin adopting and implementing the necessary measures.

Next Sunday the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina will have an opportunity to express their view on this.

If citizens turn up at the polls in large numbers and vote for candidates who have explicitly laid how they plan to get the country into Europe, they will provide an incentive that has been missing for the last four years.

BiH must be proactive

The EU has made it clear that the countries of the Western Balkans belong inside the Union, and it has provided generous political and financial support to make this happen. Right now, in Brussels, work is underway to make the EU engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina more effective. The evolving roles of the OHR, the EUSR and the European Union Delegation are being examined with a view to normalising and streamlining the International Community's activities on the ground.

There are internal developments in the EU – notably the rise of Enlargement Fatigue – that have to be taken into consideration and, where necessary, met head on.

These things will not work themselves out on their own.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has so much riding on the outcome, must be proactive.

It is time that political and cultural leaders from this country started making a clear and compelling case in Europe, that there are good reasons to encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina to join – and spelling out what those reasons are.

Until now a common argument has been that if it is coaxed along the path to EU integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina will not become a lawless failed state on Europe's borders.

This may be true – but it's hardly flattering to the good people of this country.

Infinitely more compelling, I believe, are arguments that highlight the economic, cultural and political contribution that Bosnia and Herzegovina can make to the European Union.

This potential contribution is profound and varied and it is time that leaders from this country started making it better known across the continent.

A new and positive dynamic

To sum up, we need a recognition that the blind alley is taking us nowhere and we have to get back on the European path.

Citizens can help bring this change about when they go to the polls next week.

If the turnout is high, it could create a new and much more positive political and parliamentary dynamic.

And when this dynamic has been achieved, the EU integration agenda can start to be implemented at a more rewarding pace.

But not only this.

Political representatives can develop a complementary role, which they have not fulfilled until now, and become spokespeople for this country. That means telling the European Union – loud and clear – that there are sound reasons to admit Bosnia and Herzegovina, and these go well beyond just preventing the catastrophic consequences of failure.

In other words, BiH membership would not be something to which only citizens in this country aspire. It would be something to which citizens of the EU should also aspire – because BiH membership will deliver significant benefits to everyone.

Emerging from the blind alley and showing a new confidence about this country's potential contribution to the continent can get us back on the European path – and that is where the vast majority of BiH citizens want to be, and ought to be.

Thank you