

Remarks by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko At a Panel Discussion on the European Perspective of the Balkans



Priority for BiH

The priority in Bosnia and Herzegovina today is to form a coalition government urgently that can tackle the economic crisis and get the country back on the road to Europe.

Part of this effort will involve reforming the constitution so that legislation – including legislation laid out in the European Partnership and the SAA – cannot be easily blocked by a minority of politicians.

The last election saw a noticeable swing towards non-nationalist pragmatism among BiH voters and I believe there is now a large constituency that wants a different, constructive policy to the short- and long-term benefit of the people, leaving stagnation behind.

These stakeholders subscribe to the same values we do – European values. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and citizens of the Western Balkans want the same rights as

citizens in the EU.

That means the right to prosper in a free market; it means the right to security through the rule of law; it means the right to free speech through independent media; and it means the right of every citizen to full democratic participation in state institutions.

As we work with our domestic partners to make realistic political compromises I think it's important that we maintain a clear distinction between what is essential and what is not.

It would be a tactical as well as a moral error if we were to compromise core European values that are supported by the majority of people in order to accommodate short-term demands from parts of the political establishment.

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Reinforced EU in BiH

I have worked hard to ensure that there is a single EU Representative in BiH. This has now been agreed.

Once the EU's presence is reinforced, the OHR and EU will work side-by-side within their respective mandates.

The EU will accompany BiH on its way to EU integration; as HR I will remain focused on the implementation of Dayton and the 5+2 agenda for OHR's closure.

In carrying out my mandate to ensure that Dayton is respected, I am looking forward to working closely with my EU counterpart Peter Sørensen.

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EU Engagement

We have come to the clear conclusion that a one-size-fits-all accession strategy for the whole region will not work.

Already in previous enlargements individual country

requirements have been crucial. In the Western Balkans the disparities between neighbouring states are such that tailor-made policies for each country are particularly important.

The European Union has developed exactly these kinds of policies and they are now being implemented. I believe this shows in a very positive way that the EU can muster the necessary flexibility when it comes to supporting the regional integration process.

However, it is important to place this flexibility in the right context so that it is not misinterpreted.

The EU must be sensitive to specific conditions on the ground and it must be adaptable. But our domestic partners must not be led into the mistaken belief that they can bend EU rules.

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Importance of Conditionality

Conditionality works. We saw this with visa liberalisation for Bosnian citizens.

The conditions laid out in the SAA and the European Partnership are specifically designed to create circumstances that will deliver many of the same benefits to the citizens of candidate countries that are enjoyed by citizens of the EU.

It is important that stakeholders understand that any attempt to water down the conditions would mean watering down the subsequent benefits.

Our experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been that the effectiveness of assistance depends on maintaining clear criteria for progress.

Each stage in the EU integration process brings new benefits, and the benefits increase as accession comes closer. This was powerfully evident in the visa liberalisation process.

In recent weeks Bosnia and Herzegovina has put a number of different self-inflicted crises behind it and moved on to what we hope will be a more productive period. I have repeatedly emphasised that achieving candidate membership status, for example, will deliver new and substantial benefits to citizens. It would also benefit the politicians who can show that they care about the citizens.

This quid pro quo is indispensable and it must remain credible.

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Conclusion

I believe the same principle applies right across the region. The European Union will continue to support the citizens of the Western Balkans, taking into account the specific characteristics of their respective country. At the same time the EU will show consistency in its conditions and its unbending commitment to the EU's own core values.