Schwarz-Schilling: NGOs Must Pressure Politicians to Make Them Accountable

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offer citizens inBosnia and Herzegovina an avenue into political life – even if they are frustrated by the shortcomings of party politics, the High Representative and EU Special Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, told a group of civil-society activists meeting in the BiH parliament building today.

"We face a depressing and dangerous vicious circle. Politicians are scandalously indifferent to the interests and aspirations of voters. This makes more and more voters apathetic about participating in politics. And this, in turn, makes politicians indifferent to voters' interests and aspirations," Mr Schwarz-Schilling said during a meeting organised by the Citizens' Organisation for Democracy (*Grozd*), an NGO that has focused on making political parties respond to voters' practical concerns during the election campaign.

"The figures are frightening – and, in democratic terms, unsustainable," the High Representative/EU Special Representative said. "Election turnout in Bosnia and Herzegovina has decreased steadily, from almost 2.4 million voters in 1996 to below 1.3 million in 2002. The country is saddled with a political establishment that appears unable or unwilling to develop and explain policy, and this political establishment appeals to and depends on a shrinking and unrepresentative base of popular support."

There are two responses to this, he said. "The first is to say a plague on all your houses. I'm not going to vote. The second is to say to the parties. You are flawed but you're all we've got and I'm going to try and make you better."

He noted that *Grozd* has persuaded – by means of an effective media strategy – around 40 parties to respond to a package of 12 demands from citizens. “You have used the media to put a spotlight on the absence of policy proposals in the run-up to the elections, and you have identified the areas – jobs, poverty, health care, pensions, education, crime, corruption, EU membership, and the rest – that citizens desperately care about. You have helped to make the political agenda relevant to the mass of citizens – something the political parties were conspicuously unable to do on their own.

As the leaders elected on 1 October will take responsibility for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and lead it towards Europe after the closure of the OHR next year, Mr Schwarz-Schilling repeated his message that: “Anyone who chooses not to use the opportunity presented by the election will be allowing others to decide about his or her future.”

After the elections, he said, NGOs must pressure politicians to do the right thing. They will only enact reforms that take Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to Europe and bring prosperity “if you push them every step of the way,” the High Representative/EU Special Representative said. “You who understand the genuine problems that the citizens of this country are facing will have to come up with the ideas for solutions. You will have to develop them. You will have to lobby for their adoption. And you will have to do this on every possible issue.”

He said there was a role for NGOs in contributing to the post-election debate over constitutional reform. “We need ideas. We need discussion. And we need the kind of engagement that only civil-society activists can provide.”

“There isn’t a politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina who would contest the basic premise that power belongs to the people,” the High Representative/EU Special Representative concluded. “In this respect, I would argue that the

disappointing performance of the political system in the past decade is as much the responsibility of the people as of politicians. Because power only belongs to the people, if the people takepower. If they don't, politicians will happily keep it to themselves."

The full text of the High Representative/EU Special Representative's speech can be read at www.ohr.int