

Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko on the Seminar “The Western Balkans: the path to European integration”



A new approach for BiH and the Western Balkans

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all express my thanks to the organisers, the EU Institute for Security Studies, for bringing together such an impressive body of expertise from the Western Balkans, the European Union and a range of NGOs.

I am happy to see so many familiar faces – some of you I met just recently at an important seminar on how to re-energize the European Perspective of the Western Balkans last week in Vienna – because I believe we share a determination to help the countries of the region move into their natural home – which is the European Union.

I also know that many of us share a high degree of impatience with the slowness of this process. However, let me start with one simple observation: The path into the EU is a long one and it takes time to move forward on this path. As regards my own country Austria, it took more than 6 years to complete

accession negotiations, Spain, the current EU Presidency, took even 11 years to complete its process. It may be worthwhile not to overlook this fact in our discussion.

But let me start with a few factual remarks on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is a proven fact: The EU perspective is important for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the beginning of 2000, with the establishment of the Stabilisation and Association Process, the European perspective – i.e. the *pull* from Brussels – has been the most important vehicle to ensure progress in the country. At the same time the ESDP missions – EUFOR and EUPM – have been crucial in guaranteeing stability in the country.

Three elements have been essential in order to reach progress: **(1)** a robust and coordinated overall policy and a strong mandate of the international community; **(2)** the European integration perspective; as well as **(3)** the focus on stability.

And indeed, over the past years BiH has moved from stabilisation to association and Europeanization.

As part of this process, a number of landmark reforms have been adopted and implemented: police reform, judicial reform and fiscal reform, and the state institutions have been considerably developed and strengthened. The EU's political facilitation and financial assistance have been key to drive these reforms forward. And at the same time, in light of an overall stabilised situation, the presence of the ESDP missions has been reduced.

And as BiH has advanced on the road towards the EU and has now signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the next step would be for the country to submit its application for EU membership.

I couldn't stress enough how important it is, both for BiH and

the EU, to keep the momentum in this process.

There are, naturally, a number of remaining challenges in BiH which hamper BiH's progress towards the EU. And despite the nominal progress on the EU agenda, these underlying problems in BiH have not yet been resolved. Why? Because while BiH citizens as well as their political leaders support European integration, this has not resulted in a universal acceptance of all the reforms and efforts which are required by the EU agenda.

In particular, the unresolved political and constitutional questions continue to slow down the overall progress on this agenda. Political representatives of the three constituent peoples, of the state and of the entities have often diametrically opposed views on how the country should be organised. To make it short: Bosniaks want a strong centralised state; Serbs want a strong Republika Srpska with only a loose coordinating role for the state; and the Croats want strong self-government for themselves. These views as they stand today are of course difficult – if not impossible – to reconcile.

And these differences have increased in the past years. As a result, we have seen numerous challenges against the state and its institutions from one side, and challenges against the entities from the other.

Moreover, there have been difficulties in creating and developing the necessary state institutions and policies BiH will need for European integration. There is still no single economic space in BiH, no proper coordination of EU-related issues, the legal framework is not sufficiently harmonised and the administration in general continues to be very expensive and uncoordinated. This constitutes the main challenge BiH is facing in the EU integration process, and these problems will

become more visible as BiH further advances on the EU agenda.

This is why it is important that the EU takes these particular challenges in BiH, as well as similar challenges in the region, seriously. While the Stabilisation and Association Process has been effective to take BiH and the region forward – it is important that the EU takes into account the specific problems in the region – and adapts its policies and presence.

The standard enlargement approach – such as the one deployed during the previous enlargement of the Central and Eastern countries – should be further developed. Generally, the EU will need to become more proactive and even more engaged in order to intensify the accession process in BiH – and in the region – if we are going to have the desired results. It is important that the EU keeps the momentum in the enlargement process – at the same time as it requires the countries in the region to deliver. The idea was recently put forward by the OSI of a sort of “pre-screening” exercise. What we need is more such ideas and a discussion on how to ensure more effectiveness to our policies.

It is also important that the EU perspective for the Western Balkans is perceived as real and tangible. This is particularly important for BiH – with its current challenges. Without a credible EU perspective, and visible and concrete support for EU enlargement from the EU member states and institutions, there is a risk that the current problems in BiH will increase as a result of reduced public support to reforms needed for the integration process.

In this regard, the visa liberalisation is of utmost importance. BiH has fulfilled almost all the conditions of the visa road map. BiH now needs to quickly deal with the remaining conditions so that a decision could be taken in the second half of 2010. This would be a clear sign that the EU is

committed to BiH and the region, that efforts result in concrete improvements and it would boost the support for EU integration in general.

At the same time, I am glad to note that political relations in the region are improving. In the past months, the Croatian and Serbian presidents visited BiH with welcome reconciliation-oriented messages, the Serbian Parliament adopted the Srebrenica Resolution expressing regrets over the tragic events, and in addition some regional dialogue was facilitated by Turkey. In general, regional dialogue and reconciliation corresponds to the EU's interests in the region and should be actively supported.

One question is : how to improve our European engagement? In order to ensure progress in BiH, it is important that the EU uses its many valuable instruments most effectively. The EU should better define and communicate the conditions which are necessary for EU integration and how they should be implemented. This is particularly important in BiH where there are constant disputes over the competencies between the State and entities. Furthermore, it is fundamental for the EU's credibility and further progress of the region that the EU is perceived to be firm and fair when it comes to its conditions.

In the context of BiH, as I mentioned, it is important that the EU also considers what other tools it has available to drive reforms forward. The EU should, simply speaking, more actively use its toolbox – the sticks and carrots – that are available.

The development of a more proactive approach should be facilitated by the establishment of the EU's External Action Service as well as with the new High Representative. And indeed, High Representative Ashton outlined the need for a new strategy for BiH in her inaugural presentation to the European

Parliament.

The establishment of the External Action Service will likely also impact the wider international presence in BiH. The EU has made clear that BiH cannot move forward on the EU agenda as long as there is no decision on the OHR closure. While it is clear that BiH will need to develop more responsibility in dealing with its own issues, the closure of the OHR is still a sensitive issue among the BiH political leaders and the citizens. Therefore, the EU will also need to take this into account when it decides about its future presence and role in BiH.

European integration is not just an option for the countries of the region, it is the natural and only option. Re-energizing, intensifying the integration process is not only desirable, it is also urgent – because we have now a window of opportunity, and that window will not remain open indefinitely.

I hope today's discussion will produce ideas that will help Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans to move along the road to the EU at a more satisfactory pace. I believe this can be done.

Thank you.