

Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko, at a Conference Organised by the BiH Central Election Commission, to Mark International Election Day



Democracies Don't Work on Automatic Pilot

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Central Election Commission is a BiH institution that works. It has supervised a succession of efficiently run elections, and by doing this it has played a key role in maintaining the integrity of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It must continue to play this role, and any attempt to exert influence or control over the Central Election Commission must be resisted vigorously.

Democracies don't work on automatic pilot. They need to be protected and upheld through the determined and active support of citizens.

The common thread in the experience of countries that have made the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule is that the process involves change that goes beyond writing constitutions and enacting laws.

It requires a shift in popular perception and it requires a shift in the way that people understand the right to acquire and exercise power.

This change in thinking is not yet complete in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And because it is incomplete, democracy in this country remains a challenge..

There is an understandable frustration among citizens because of the rapid spread of unemployment and poverty. Yet there is also a feeling that the political leaders who have presided over this crisis are not seriously accountable to citizens. One thing is sure – the politicians in this country should focus more on economy and less on history.

Some major parties in the country recently proposed changes to the electoral system that would actually *diminish* democratic expression and make the system *less* consistent with European standards. The initiative would have removed liberal provisions from the election law and would have reasserted the control of political parties.

This would have widened the gap between citizens and their representatives. The fact that the proposals were rejected is positive – but citizens must remain vigilant and reject any future attempt by political parties to change the system in order to suit themselves.

The problem is that many in the BiH political establishment have failed to make the psychological shift to living and operating in a democracy.

They have not yet grasped that they do not have a natural right to exercise power, let alone a natural right to hold onto power.

Power has been given to them for a trial period by the

electorate.

An efficient and fully independent Central Election Commission is the guarantee that what has been given can be taken away.

It is therefore crucial that the CEC remains completely and transparently independent of political influence or control.

Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not up for debate – the people have rights and the political establishment cannot chip away at those rights.

As I said earlier, democracy doesn't work on automatic pilot – it has to be defended. It has to be advanced and strengthened. This is an *active* process. In this respect it is extremely encouraging to see that many civil society organizations raised their voice against the regressive attempt to amend the election law.

Parties that want to remain in power can achieve this – not by changing the electoral system but by enacting legislation and implementing policies that will end the economic crisis and get Bosnia and Herzegovina back on the road to Europe.

These things can be done before October.

As in other democracies, the election system is often not the problem. The problem is the people who get elected – and every four years citizens have an opportunity to fix that. People of Bosnia and Herzegovina deserve politicians who would take care of the economy, who would promote independent, functional and effective institutions, who would fight corruption and organized crime, in short, who would put the interests of the citizen on the first place!

Thank you