

Speech by HR/EUSR Christian Schwarz-Schilling at a Meeting of BiH Non-Governmental Organisations

The Joint Institutions Building

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you today. I say this because I know how much work you have to do, how hard you have to work and how important the work is you do.

Though you work in many different fields, you all deal with the kinds of issues that affect the lives of your fellow citizens. You address concrete problems and your efforts help improve the quality of life in this country.

I am also acutely aware of how hard you are going to have to work in the future.

I say this because though this country has come a long way since the end of the war, it still has many, many deep-rooted problems that require solutions. And it's the non-governmental sector that can and should be the driving force behind many of the reforms that this country requires in order to progress in the coming years.

Today, I wish to enlist your support in two matters.

I want you to help ensure that the wider population understands the importance of the forthcoming election and to encourage as many of your fellow citizens to vote as possible.

And I want you to continue and to intensify your work after

the elections.

I ask because you have extensive networks throughout this country. You command respect and you will be listened to. I ask also because your work and the health of the non-governmental sector in general is critical to ensuring that Bosnia and Herzegovina is equipped to take ownership of its destiny.

Political parties are the main cogs and levers in the machinery of parliamentary democracy. But in this country – where the parliamentary tradition is relatively short – we have seen that the parties (and I'm not singling out individual parties; this is a generic problem) have significant limitations.

- They demonstrate a continuing inability to develop detailed policy and communicate this through effective outreach to voters.
- They display an excessive reliance on slogans as opposed to sustained arguments.
- And they have, across the board, failed to break free from a clientelist approach to political life, where voters expect candidates to champion a particular constituency – rather than the common good – and candidates for the most part oblige.

Now, there are two responses to this.

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.

By coming here this afternoon, you are demonstrating that you have chosen the second and that you don't have to be in a political party to be engaged in politics.

However, unless you can effect a major change, half of the electorate next week will choose the first.

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.

The figures are frightening – and, in democratic terms, unsustainable. 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.

As a result, tens of thousands of voters threaten to opt out of one of the most important one-off political exercises of their lives, and stay at home next Sunday.

All elections are important. But the forthcoming poll is especially significant because of the changing nature of the international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The leaders elected in the forthcoming poll have to take responsibility for the future the country and to lead it towards Europe after the closure of the Office of the High Representative next year.

Anyone who chooses not to use the opportunity presented by the election will be allowing others to decide about his or her future.

I am, therefore, looking to you to coax voters into using the democratic instrument that is at their disposal on 1 October.

Democracy is not, however, simply about voting. As a result, I am also looking to you to make sure that the individuals elected to work in this building and other parliaments across Bosnia and Herzegovina for the next four years remain accountable to the electorate and push through the reforms that this country requires.

The last time I made a speech in this building, in May, I was addressing the combined Houses of Parliament. On that occasion, I outlined an ambitious yet realistic reform agenda that would have directly improved the lot of the citizens of this country.

In the intervening months, however, not one law that I specifically mentioned was passed.

Too many politicians appear to believe that their supporters will continue to back them on the strength of a handful of slogans and that most citizens are too weary and distracted to examine the damage that the parties have done to the country by their refusal to act constructively and pass these laws.

At the same time as the legislative agenda stalled, progress on the reforms that are needed to secure a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union by the end of this year has been brought to a standstill.

Every single voter in this country wants to move closer to Europe.

But that isn't going to happen until key reforms, especially police reform and PBS reform, have been completed in line with the principles defined by the European Commission.

And the reforms required for the signing of an SAA are only the beginning of the reform process. Bosnia and Herzegovina ,

like every other aspiring member of the European Union, will have to reform almost every aspect of its society to bring it in line with European norms.

Now, the situation is gloomy – but it is by no means hopeless. In fact I believe in the coming days Bosnia and Herzegovina's fortunes can be turned around.

And I believe that *you* represent the very people who can engineer this positive transformation. And, in the coming months and years, I will be looking to you to drive the reform process.

Let's face it. Despite their electoral promises, parliamentarians cannot simply legislate higher salaries and pensions, increased social benefits and the immediate return of stolen wealth.

What they can do, however, is pass laws that will help create the conditions in which the citizens of this country can themselves create the wealth that will enable Bosnia and Herzegovina to afford the promises that are made at election time.

But they will only do that if you take the initiative and if you push them every step of the way.

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.

One issue on which I will be looking for your input in the coming months is constitutional reform.

This question will return to the top of the political agenda as soon as the election is over.

We need ideas. We need discussion. And we need the kind of

engagement that only civil-society activists can provide.

I am confident that you can make a difference because of the ways in which civil-society activists have been making an impact on this election.

Grozđ has persuaded – by means of an effective media strategy – around 40 parties to respond to a package of 12 demands from citizens.

The method and the substance of this initiative is instructive. 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.

The tens of thousands of citizens who signed your petition represent tens of thousands of voters.

Another example of effective campaign intervention can be found in the activities of *Dosta*.

There isn't a politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina who would contest the basic premise that power belongs to the people. In this respect, I would argue that the disappointing performance of the political system in the last decade is as much the responsibility of the people as of politicians.

Because power only belongs to the people, if the people *take* power.

If they don't, politicians will happily keep it to themselves.

The demonstrations that have been organized by *Dosta* throughout the country have made this point very clear. The

people are prepared to act. The status quo may be acceptable to the political establishment but it is not acceptable to the citizens of this country – who do not have chauffeur-driven Audis and smart suits and comfortable homes paid for by the other people.

You have sent a clear message: *Mi vas gledamo* [We are watching you].

As a matter of fact, I'm rather sorry that I don't see any *Dosta* t-shirts in the room this afternoon. Maybe I haven't been looking closely enough. Maybe you're all wearing them under your shirts and jumpers.

It wouldn't be a bad idea if we could arrange for them to be given to every voter as they enter the voting booth. Perhaps, I too should wear one on election day.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your task is a difficult one, but it is critical for democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Your immediate challenge is to channel election debate away from empty rhetoric and focus on clearly defined policies and clearly defined voting records. Your longer-term mission is to ensure that the individuals elected on 1 October work in the interests of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There are just nine days to go to the election, but after half a century in active party politics I can tell you this. If politicians are made to explain, then citizens will be persuaded to come out and vote.

I believe that you have it in your power to make this happen because you have a track record of increasing success.

I remember very well the conditions in which NGOs in this country had to work in the years immediately after the war. Civil society had been intimidated and distorted by the

conflict; in places it had been absolutely crushed.

Yet even during the worst of the fighting there were those who stood up for reason, for common sense and decency, for inclusiveness, diversity and civic values.

History will vindicate that stance.

NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are reasserting themselves. Your participation in democratic debate is not on sufferance, it is by right.

The political parties can only be made to succeed if they are made accountable and you have the capacity to make them accountable.

Get out the vote. And keep lobbying, demonstrating and pressing... for what you believe in.

Thank you