

Večernji list: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Hassan Haidar Diab

Večernji list: You have recently stated that the international community plans to give a chance to the representatives of BiH's parliamentary parties to agree on changes to the Election Law of BiH by April, possibly by the beginning of May. Afterwards, the pressure will increase as you will not allow BiH to become a "Mostar-like case". Which specific moves do you exactly intend to make, if the Election Law is not changed by this deadline?

Valentin Inzko: I was amongst the first to state clearly that Constitutional Court decisions are final and must be implemented. I was consistent. The political parties in BiH therefore must find a solution for electoral reforms that ensures the smooth implementation of the election results in accordance with the decision of the BiH Constitutional Court. Not all options have been exhausted yet. If there is genuine political will, and if politicians care about this country and its citizens, as they claim, then there is still some time left. We have seen many times before that that BiH is a country of last minute solutions. Currently, the EU and the US are facilitating discussions between political parties and I wholeheartedly support this effort. When asked, the OHR also provides assistance through legal expertise.

Večernji list: How could a recent trilateral meeting that took place in Mostar between President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić and the BiH Presidency members, help in terms of solving the Election Law issue?

Valentin Inzko: I agree with what the Croatian and Serbian presidents said after the meetings, offering friendly support and encouragement to find solutions but underlining that concrete solutions must come from domestic political engagement.

Večernji list: To which extent could Croatia and Serbia be a factor of stability, or of destabilization in BiH, considering that the tensions have been rising ever since the Hague verdict in the case of six Croats and at some point there has even been some sabre-rattling?

Valentin Inzko: Regional cooperation is the key to regional stability. This is what we have experienced in the EU, e.g. between Tyrol in Austria and South Tyrol in Italy. It is rightfully highlighted as one of the priorities in the new EU enlargement strategy. Yes, you can occasionally hear some dissonance among country leaders and politicians, but overall I find that cooperation between the countries is very good. Also trade figures are impressive. We are speaking about billions of euros. It is a clear win-win situation. Aside from the common background shared by the countries, there is also a common future, by which I mean EU membership. Croatia is already a member. Serbia and BiH are at different stages of the accession path. Croatia's experience is a valuable asset for BiH and Serbia along this path. I am very grateful for the assistance Croatia has provided to BiH, and its role as a voice of support for BiH's accession efforts in Brussels.

Večernji list: What is your assessment of the general situation, security situation and political situation in BiH?

Valentin Inzko: The state of BiH, its institutions and competences, has been continuously challenged by the main political party in one entity. This has been on-going for more than a decade. Unfortunately, it has also spread into the FBiH, where one political party is trying very hard to unpackage current arrangements in the FBiH. In other words, some politicians in BiH question constitutional arrangements in BiH, which produces a serious functionality and political crisis in the country. However, there are also positive achievements. In September, BiH joined the Transport Community Treaty with the EU. In December the BiH Parliament adopted the outstanding fuel excises package, which will open the door for future infrastructure projects. The European Commission's questionnaire is completed. Not everything is bleak. Nobody claims that reforms are easy or painless, but they must be done. Some years back the Istanbul Convention was adopted unanimously without any problems.

Večernji list: You say you want to go home, but "some statements coming from Banja Luka keep extending your stay". What did you specifically have in mind and do you fear that Republika Srpska President, Milorad Dodik could declare secession? In the event of the RS secession, what do you

intend to do?

Valentin Inzko: To be clear: The sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH is guaranteed by the BiH Constitution and by international law, including the Dayton Peace Agreement. Under the GFAP, BiH consists of two entities that exist legally by virtue of the BiH Constitution and have no right to secede. The entities have an obligation to comply fully with the Constitution and ought to, according to original Dayton, "assist the State to fulfill its international obligations". Politicians should focus on reforms that bring concrete benefits such as new jobs, better healthcare and public services, better roads, education, etc. It is not a revolutionary recipe, but it works. The good people of this country want these results. Sadly, it seems it is much easier to use scare tactics such as secession talk or potential war scenarios rather than doing the hard work to make this country more attractive to investors. Secession talks, of course, extend my stay, but this is in a way against my will.

Večernji list: Are you concerned with the establishment of the "Srbska čast" Brigade and a recent purchase of a large quantity of weapons by Republika Srpska?

Valentin Inzko: Some security-related developments are of concern, especially to ordinary people. They revive horrible memories from the past. Examples such as you mention are issues the international community is following closely.

Večernji list: How do you comment Dodik's attacks against Bishop Franjo Komarica? He even accused the Bishop of "barking"...

Valentin Inzko: The Bishop of Banja Luka, Franjo Komarica, is a great man, one of the few pillars of morality in this region. That is my view, but also the general perception of this shepherd who has been fighting selflessly for two and a half decades for the rights of Catholics, but also for the equality of all peoples in BiH. When you talk to his parishioners, you will always hear words that are difficult to forget. They will recall that the Bishop has been saying, throughout the duration of the war: "Your strongest weapon is the Rosary, pray for your enemies." His image among his parishioners is fixed, they see their Bishop as a peacemaker, a humanitarian, and one deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately, when the RS President Dodik states that he forbids Komarica to "bark" around the world about the RS, I doubt that such remarks would be supported by Serbs living in Banja Luka, even those who have voted for Dodik. Such statements usually speak more about the speaker than anyone else. As a matter of principle, I can only say that the language used by President Dodik against Bishop Komarica is not worthy of the presidency. This is not the way to achieve fame. By the way, as you probably already know, the Bishop has also been critical of the engagement of the international community when it comes to sustainable return of Croats to the Bishopric of Banja Luka, and generally to the RS. Unfortunately, I can partly agree with him. I also believe that occasionally the international community did not do enough for the sustainable return of refugees, i.e. the implementation of Annex 7 of the DPA. This is our obligation, in the region of Banja Luka and elsewhere. This is the true Dayton that President Dodik frequently mentions, but this part he seemingly keeps forgetting. As an investigative journalist, you could look into how much money was allocated in the RS budget during Dodik's two mandates as the Prime Minister, as well as the presidential mandate, for the return of refugees, compared to money spent on lobbying in centers of power. It is obvious that President Dodik would like to prevent the Bishop from giving his opinions about past and present events around the world, but I feel that the RS authorities should finally do more in relation to guaranteed human rights, from freedom of speech to the right to work, which are also guaranteed to Croats in this entity. Then the Bishop would have enough reason to commend the entity authorities, and I am convinced he would do so.

Večernji list: How realistic is it to expect that a review of the Dayton Accords will take place, resulting in a third entity for Croats?

Valentin Inzko: The third entity is something completely unrealistic. It is occasionally a hot topic for the media, and it is often rolled out during election campaigns, but the only concrete result of such activities is increased tensions. Such comprehensive changes would require the consent of representatives of all three constituent peoples. I simply do not see it happening. There is no understanding for such a move in the international community. But I was always of the opinion that people should be extremely generous to each other. Also towards the Croats. But also Croats towards the Serbs, e.g. in the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, where Serbs do not exist even in the Constitution, despite a Constitutional Court decision, which is now 10 years old.

Večernji list: Why is the problem of Mostar still unresolved? What is the reason that you, as the High Representative, have failed to do something in order to resolve this problem?

Valentin Inzko: I have engaged in the past, as has the international community. In 2012 and 2013 there was a large mediation effort led by my principal deputy at the time, Ambassador Roderick Moore. There were 100 or so meetings with various political parties. The result of these efforts was a solid framework for finishing the job. So why was the job not finished? Because for years domestic political stakeholders remained locked in their initial entrenched positions without much meaningful engagement. However, I am pleased to see the recent meetings by the local boards of the parties in Mostar, in which it appears they may be close to reaching agreement on certain issues. I would encourage them to keep pushing forward and finally deliver a solution to enable the citizens of Mostar to exercise their right to vote for the first time in 10 years.

Večernji list: Are you concerned with the rise of Islamic radicalism in BiH and with the return of jihadists from Iraq and Syria to BiH?

Valentin Inzko: Radicalism and extremism are serious issues in today's world. The Ministry of Security under Minister Mektić is vigilant in this regard. The PIC Steering Board has called on relevant authorities in BiH to continue to improve coordination and full cooperation, internally and internationally, to counter the common threat of terrorism, and all forms of violent radicalism and extremism. However, misusing this problem for political or any other purposes is not helpful. This issue requires the full and sincere engagement of all sectors of society.

Večernji list: Can the escalation of violence in Kosovo and the tensions between Russia, Europe and the USA affect the situation in BiH?

Valentin Inzko: Of course, there are concerns about negative spillover when it comes to events in neighboring countries, as well as in the region or even on the global stage. BiH is not immune. But I do not expect an escalation as far as BiH is concerned.

Večernji list: According to some of your recent statements, there have been some threats directed against you. Who is threatening you and why?

Valentin Inzko: I was referring to campaign some time ago, which included postcards addressed to me telling me to go home and abandon my mandate. Everybody has a right to express their views on my work, but some 20 of the postcards contained death threats against me and my family. This of course is a very serious matter and the case is with the relevant institutions.

Večernji list: How optimistic are you about a prospect of BiH's membership in the EU and NATO? In your opinion, which are the biggest obstacles to BiH's membership in NATO and the EU?

Valentin Inzko: I have no doubt that BiH will eventually become a member of the EU, but I remind you that it took seven years for my home country Austria to complete its journey. Another two for Schengen. Things are moving more slowly in BiH because certain politicians are afraid that the divisive issues on which they are currently capitalizing will become irrelevant once BiH moves closer to integration. If they are unable to adapt to the new political paradigm, then they will become obsolete. As for NATO, I must reiterate that joining NATO is a foreign policy issue and as such according to the BiH Constitution an exclusive responsibility of the state. In 2009, the BiH Presidency, on behalf of BiH, asked for the NATO Membership Action Plan, in a formal request to the NATO Secretary General signed by Serb Presidency member Radmanovic. Decisions of the BiH Presidency remain in force unless repealed or superseded by new decisions.

Večernji list: Are you satisfied with the work of the judicial authorities in BiH?

Valentin Inzko: In virtually every public opinion poll, when asked what they see as the main problem, people say crime, corruption and nepotism. They have the impression that those in higher positions are above the law. This perceived disregard for the rule of law is also driving the "brain drain" from BiH, as it is one of the main complaints of those who leave to seek a better future abroad. The rule of law, in an accelerated way, should therefore be the priority of all priorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This of course will also positively reflect on the neighboring countries.