

Večer: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko

By Vanessa Čokl

Večer: Mr. Inzko, what happened in BiH? Did the social bomb detonate in an economically, financially and socially destroyed and politically dysfunctional country?

Valentin Inzko: The message that has emerged from the ongoing protests is clear: citizens are tired of the divisive rhetoric and lack of progress on real issues we have seen from the authorities and the political leaders in the past years. They are tired of corruption, economic mismanagement, and inequality. Something now needs to change. In this context, the demonstrations have happened for a clear reason, and they should be a wake up call to elected officials and political parties. In many ways I am surprised that these protests did not start earlier.

Let me also reiterate that the international community in BiH fully supports the right of citizens to protest. However, equally, I have made clear that these demonstrations must be peaceful and conducted in line with the law. Violence and the destruction of property by a few only detract attention from the legitimate demands of the many.

Večer: There has been criticism directed at the OHR and you personally, since you are the highest ranking factor in the governing pyramid of the post-Dayton BiH. In BiH one can hear accusations that the OHR is maintaining an atmosphere of neither war nor peace, a status quo, a virtual BiH where life is increasingly difficult, and the development gap for everyone only keeps growing. Where does this lead, the fact that BiH is an international protectorate? The local authorities are not working, or are they not able to work?

Valentin Inzko: The international community shares the same

concerns and frustrations when it comes to the lack of progress in BiH in recent years. It is a well known fact that over the last several years the international community has pursued a policy of 'ownership' whereby the local authorities are to take more responsibility for delivering the reforms needed to move the country forward. This has meant that the OHR has taken a less active role and I understand that many people are frustrated by this. As difficult a process as this is, I am glad to see that people are now directing their expectations for change at the right address: the elected leaders. This is a significant step forward for democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and I am ready to accept some criticism if this is the price for this to become a country where elected officials and citizens together drive the country forward.

It is now the responsibility of all the authorities and leaders in this country to take action to solve the long-standing problems in the country. BiH has its own institutions and political leaders which are elected in democratic elections. They have a job to do, and they need to live up to their promises to the voters they have made year after year. As elsewhere, citizens should hold their elected political leaders accountable and make the right choices in the elections. This is how democracy works and this is what we should aim for in BiH as well.

At the same time, I want to be crystal clear that the international community remains engaged in Bosnia and Herzegovina and remains absolutely committed to preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of this country. As a result of the ongoing demonstrations, we have seen an increased attention towards BiH from the entire international community. This attention is welcome and it sends a clear message that the international community cares about Bosnia and Herzegovina and is ready to help the citizens and the authorities to find solutions to the ongoing problems.

Večer: Is the key to establish a three-entity structure and then hold democratic elections everywhere? BiH is de facto ethnically divided, and any attempt to again pursue brotherhood and unity is an illusion.

Valentin Inzko: The key solution to BiH's problems is that we finally see a fundamental change in the way politics is conducted in this country. The authorities and the political leaders must finally start putting the interests of citizens first and address the long-standing socio-economic and political problems, such as corruption, unemployment, and the lack of economic opportunity. All the citizens throughout the country face the same problems.

I do not agree with the attempt by some leaders to portray these protests as ethnically motivated, something which clearly are not. I call on leaders throughout the country to refrain from such irresponsible statements, trying to add an ethnic dimension to protests which have nothing to do with whether someone is a Serb, a Croat, or a Bosniak. An empty stomach is an empty stomach. Citizens are deeply concerned for their future and expect politicians to act on their demands. The last thing they want is politicians who abuse the protests to score political points or raise ethnic tensions.

At the same time, it is a fact that the Federation and its governing structures are inefficient and expensive. The fact that some have called for constitutional changes should not be perceived by anyone as a threat. The demonstrations cannot by themselves lead to changes to the constitutional set-up of the Federation and its Cantons or to the structure of BiH as a whole. Such changes can only come about through the legislative process to amend constitutions, where all sides are included and certain protections exist. So let me take this opportunity to reassure people that unilateral changes to the internal structures of this country are not possible; they can only be made if all sides in BiH agree. And, as I have already said, the international community remains absolutely

committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Večer: Protests from Tuzla to Sarajevo have erupted at an inconvenient time. This year marks the centenary of the First World War, and the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. After the 1990s war, is BiH still a powder keg?

Valentin Inzko: As I mentioned before, I am rather surprised that the ongoing protests in the country did not happen earlier given the long-standing problems in the country. In this context, I see absolutely no inconvenience in the ongoing demonstrations. They are happening for a very good and specific reason and the political leaders should listen.

The commemoration of the centenary of the First World War and also the ongoing demonstrations are positive for BiH because there will be a lot of focus on the country in the months to come. I expect that the authorities and political leaders in BiH will be able to use this to their advantage. It is true that, for a small country, BiH has had quite a share in the world's history but that in no way means that the citizens here do not share the same concerns as other citizens in Europe.

Večer: Were you serious about (another) deployment of EU troops to BiH? It overly resembles toying with a new war. Will there ultimately be a Dayton 2? Would that be necessary?

Valentin Inzko: My comments on EUFOR to an Austrian newspaper were reported out of context and misrepresented, which was already recognized by the author. EU High Representative Ashton has also been clear on this point, so there is nothing further for me to add.

Regarding the reference to possible constitutional changes in BiH, it is clear that BiH's decision-making structures are complicated and its administration far too costly. These are

issues that will need to be dealt with if BiH is genuinely interested in Euro-Atlantic integration and just simply for the country to be governed better. The international community has in the past – through various reform initiatives – been trying to help BiH address these questions. These problems and priorities remain, and the international community is ready to support such initiatives in the future as well. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, constitutional changes can only come about through the existing legislative mechanisms for changing constitutions, which require all sides in BiH to agree on the way forward. Therefore there is no reason for any one to feel that their national interests are somehow threatened.

Furthermore, constitutional changes should not be mixed up with the current demonstrations. The priority of the political leaders should now be to address key reforms and make the country and the services to the citizens work better – no matter what constitutional framework is in place.