

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Rhetoric and responsibility”

Rhetoric and responsibility

By Christian Schwarz-Schilling

Come October, the very same politicians who have been heaping abuse on and provoking one another in recent weeks will be desperately seeking to build coalitions with each other to form new governments, sharing out the power that citizens have entrusted to them. Yet the more abusive the campaign rhetoric now, the more difficult it will be to find the necessary partners to create functioning institutions.

Words matter and what is said cannot be unsaid. Politicians of all people should understand this. Inflammatory rhetoric raises tensions and this, in turn, can all too easily escalate into violence in a society where weapons are everywhere, alcohol plentiful and the summer long and hot.

The rhetoric has been intensifying for several months now and, despite last week's shocking attack on Alija Izetbegovic's grave, does not appear to be abating.

To be sure, initial reactions to this outrage were generally moderate and designed to cool passions, just as they should have been given the danger of tit-for-tat escalation. I was particularly impressed by Bakir Izetbegovic's measured words – the best possible tribute to his father's legacy – at what must have been an extremely harrowing time for his whole family. I also noted Dragan Cavic's intentionally calming response.

Nobody yet knows who was behind the attack or why they carried out this despicable act. Unless and until the ongoing police investigation yields concrete results, we have no idea as to the perpetrators' motives. But because of the sensitivities surrounding this case and the danger of enflaming passions, it benefits no one to indulge in deliberately mischievous speculation.

Hence my disappointment at the immediate reaction of Zoran Djeric in the name of the Party for Democratic Progress to the effect that this was a Bosniac attempt to divert attention from the suffering of Serbs during Operation Storm, and my amazement at Nikola Spiric's reported comments blaming Bosniac extremists for the attack and dredging up conspiracy theories concerning the Markale market massacre in 1994.

Since none of these individuals has presented any evidence to support their statements, it is difficult not to conclude that they were deliberately seeking to fan the flames of intolerance. Such behaviour is not worthy of anyone seeking to hold public office in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Given this country's recent past, anyone standing for election and all office-holders have a duty to behave responsibly in both word and deed, to foster a climate of peace and security and to bear in mind at all times that Bosnia and Herzegovina and both its entities are multinational communities of three constituent peoples.

Statements clearly designed to enflame tensions – including loose talk about referendums or the forcible abolition of an entity – are unacceptable.

Since becoming High Representative and EU Special Representative in February this year, I have been working towards local ownership of the peace process, including the closure of the Office of the High Representative. In this way, I have generally chosen not to use my authority, the so-called

“ Bonn powers”. Rather, I have sought to see how this country’s institutions and leaders operate in the absence of an intrusive international role.

In order to effect such a transition, however, I have to be sure that Bosnia and Herzegovina is firmly on the road to European integration.

For this, the rhetoric has to stop and politicians need to demonstrate that they can also be leaders and healers. Otherwise, how can citizens have any confidence that they can responsibly manage the power their votes will entrust to them on 1 October, and move this country forwards and not backwards?

Christian Schwarz-Schilling is the international community’s High Representative and European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.