

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Shame on Those Who Stay at Home on Sunday”

The history I learned at school was full of dates – perhaps readers of my generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina had the same experience. First and foremost we learned the dates of battles. Then we learned the dates of treaties. History seemed like a long succession of wars starting, wars finishing and wars starting again. And in among the treaties and battles there were revolutions.

It was in many ways a history of violence. It was certainly a history of power. And when we had memorized the dates of the treaties and battles and revolutions we started to learn about the powerful figures who had fought the battles and signed the treaties and made the revolutions.

History was the story of “Great Men”. But of the millions who died in those wars, the millions whose lives were affected by those treaties and those revolutions – of these people we learned very little.

Yet the whole drama of our common past, the unfolding story of our civilizations is not to be found in the lives of a small number of powerful men. It resides in the lives of the millions of men and women – our fathers and mothers and their fathers and mothers.

We understand today that their experience is precious. We understand how important it is to try to understand their

aspirations were and their fears were and their achievements. Today, schoolchildren learn what the lives of ordinary people were like in the past. And this is as it should be.

Today we understand that society consists not of a privileged few – those who have power. It is made up of all of us.

In case I should appear to be stating the obvious, let us consider exactly what will happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina this Sunday. The people – all the people – will decide who is to govern. Not just the powerful, not just the privileged few.

Yet at the last general election, more than a million citizens who had the right to vote did not exercise that right. Perhaps many of these people went to school at a time when we were still taught the history of the powerful. Perhaps they have not shed the notion that important decisions are made by a privileged few. This is not true any more.

Another reason people do not vote is that they think “the parties are all the same”. Yet they are only the same if the people let them be the same. If the people vote, if the people express their sovereign will, then the parties and their representatives will be obliged to listen and to respond.

In our history books we learned little of the suffering during the famines, wars and disasters that were caused by the misgovernment of the powerful. And we learned even less about the achievements of peace. The achievements of peace are invariably the achievements of the people – industry, trade, prosperity, care for the infirm and the elderly, rising standards of education. These are the work of millions, not the work of a handful of decision-makers.

This weekend the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina can choose an era of prosperity and peace. Within this country's grasp is a functioning democracy that accommodates the different religious and cultural traditions, a vibrant economy plugged into global trade, full integration in Europe and NATO –

providing freedom of travel and unquestioned security.

This is within reach – but only if voters reach out on Sunday and express their will. Power is not for a privileged few. It is for everybody. Reach out and take it. Shame on those who stay at home on Sunday.

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