Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Time to Change Thinking as Well as Clothes”

Springtime is a season of new beginnings, new opportunities, new hopes. It’s a time to open windows and clear out cobwebs. And it’s the time of year to make changes and make plans.

If we want to reflect the regeneration in nature all around us and match the brighter weather by creating better prospects for ourselves and our society, then we have to take positive practical steps. Nowhere is this more true than in politics.

After six long months in which we have seen a great deal of acrimony and little constructive dialogue, a dramatic change in the tone of political debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina is overdue.

Even after the elections, many parties reduced their public pronouncements to the level of slogans – easy on the ear, pleasing to some constituents, but far short of a serious response to the complex challenges facing this country and all its citizens.

Because of this we have lost valuable time. But we are now – at last – at a point where we can move on. We have governments in both Entities and we have a Council of Ministers, which, after an uncertain start, is beginning to find its feet. And

after delays caused – in some cases – by procedural wrangling, the parliaments are starting to address an ambitious and far-reaching reform agenda.

We had anticipated that a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union would have been initialled by now. It hasn't been, and that is a serious blow to the hopes of four million citizens. However, we know why it hasn't been initialled. There is no mystery about what must now be done to open the way to Europe and there is no question that it can be done.

The task facing the political leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to take forward the process – already in most cases well advanced – of police restructuring, constitutional reform and reforms in the defence, education and broadcasting sectors, in the civil service and in key areas of the economy.

By doing this they can ensure that the next six months deliver many more practical advantages to citizens than the past six months.

Some citizens will greet this with weary scepticism. We have been here before; we have called for a change in attitude, for faster reforms, for greater engagement and more constructive dialogue. Why should the politicians listen this time round?

My response is that in the past the political leadership of this country has shown that it can do the right thing. Major progress has been made, politically, socially and economically. Things are better today than they were five years ago. The problem is the pace of these improvements. It isn't nearly fast enough – because we seem to take two steps forward and then a step backward before we take the next steps forward again.

This stop-start approach – where leaders renege on agreements they have signed and try to renegotiate them all over again, thus wasting valuable time and resources – is a direct result

of the relatively comfortable circumstances in which many of this country's politicians find themselves. This weekend, ministers and parliamentarians, as well as other members of the privileged elite, will take out their summer suits and put their winter clothes into storage. It's an annual ritual.

But most citizens do not have the luxury of a summer wardrobe and a winter wardrobe. There is a gulf between politicians and hard working citizens, who must struggle just to get by in a system bedevilled by unemployment, poverty and corruption. Politicians may not understand the urgency of reforms – but citizens do.

My advice to political leaders: Put away the slogans of the past six months along with your winter suits. It is time to change thinking as well as clothes.

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