

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Voting for a European Future”

Today is the 100th day since my speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the first day of the election campaign, exactly one month before the poll to elect a new Parliamentary Assembly. It is, therefore, time to pass judgement on the performance of those elected in the 2002 elections and to determine which leaders and parties can best build a European future for this country and all its citizens.

The legislative record of the past 100 days is anything but impressive; zero-sum politics has at times paralysed institutions; and inflammatory rhetoric has stoked ethnic tension. It is enough to turn almost anybody off from politics. Many electors, especially younger ones, may therefore be wondering whether it is worth voting in the forthcoming poll.

In all countries, the young are the least likely to vote because often they believe their vote will not make any difference. But giving up the opportunity to vote would be a mistake.

All elections are important. However, the forthcoming poll is especially significant because of the changing nature of the international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The leaders elected on 1 October this year will have to take responsibility for the future of this country and to lead it towards Europe after the closure of the Office of the High

Representative next year.

This election is about the pace at which Bosnia and Herzegovina moves towards Europe and anyone who chooses not to vote is effectively allowing others to decide about his or her future.

When I was a young man, the future of my country was no clearer than that of Bosnia and Herzegovina today. Germany had been defeated in war. It was divided. And democracy was in its infancy. There was no European Union at that time. But through NATO, the Marshall Plan and later the European Coal and Steel Community, there was a Euro-Atlantic perspective for Germany that the country's then Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, seized.

Germany joined NATO in 1955 and was one of the founding members of today's European Union in 1957. And when the two halves of Germany were reunited in 1991, the NATO Secretary General was a German, the late Manfred Wörner.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has similar Euro-Atlantic prospects today. Indeed, the path to Euro-Atlantic integration is much clearer today than it was more than half a century ago. Today, the Partnership-for-Peace Programme provides a clear first step towards membership in NATO. And the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, that Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently negotiating with the European Commission, is the first step to membership in the European Union.

To help Bosnia and Herzegovina on this route, I am building a new Office in my capacity as EU Special Representative that will remain here after the closure of the Office of the High Representative to coordinate the work of all European actors, including the European Commission, EUFOR and the EU Police Mission. However, I cannot lead Bosnia and Herzegovina to Europe. I can only work together with partners determined to build a European future for their country.

For the young in this country, the immediate step to building a European future is becoming engaged in the election campaign and voting in October. The politics of this country leaves much to be desired, but the only way to change and improve it is to participate actively. And the way to keep the process of Euro-Atlantic integration moving is to remain involved.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a European future and that future will open up greater opportunities for this country's youth than many have even dreamed about. Several will definitely rise to prominent positions in the European Union. And nothing would please me more than to learn that a future European Commissioner or President of the European Parliament first became engaged in politics in this election.

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