

I thank the committee for the invitation to address it today. First allow me to express condolences at the tragic loss of life in the County Donegal and wish for a speedy recovery to those who were injured. Also let me express the gratitude for the active and supportive engagement of Ireland in the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past decades – in the multilateral fora, contribution to peacekeeping missions in our country – as well as a strong support to our European integration efforts.

I am addressing you at a very peculiar moment for my country and the region. On October 2nd we held general elections in a peaceful manner. As we are awaiting the election results for various levels of government, we can already say with certainty that our collective head of state – the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina – will feature two members of the Presidency who come from civic, non-nationalist parties. This is a first for a country, and it attests to the wish of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to vote in a truly democratic matter, across the ethnic lines.

The elections have come after a period of increased political turbulence – attempts at a de facto secession of a part of our country, creation of entity institutions parallel to those at the state level, threats of a unilateral territorial re-composition that would produce a so-called “third entity”, attempts to withhold budgetary means to conduct the elections, held-up in appointment of the judges to the state and entity Constitutional courts, etc. All this was followed or indeed supported by divisive rhetoric by leading public figures, that has bordered on hate speech.

Some of these issues have been addressed, at least temporarily, by the calm institutional response of domestic agencies, and increasingly robust activities of the international community, which still holds important instruments of oversight over the civilian and military implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The EU-led peacekeeping mission EUFOR ALTHEA was bolstered by additional troops and armour earlier in the year, addressing the acute security threat in the announcement of creation of parallel entity institutions, including entity armed forces and security and intelligence agencies. On the civilian side, former High Representative Valentin Inzko had imposed changes to the criminal law, making genocide denial and glorification of war criminals a criminal act. Current High Representative, Mr. Schmidt, imposed adoption of a state budget, paving the way for general elections to take place.

Our recent domestic challenges must be viewed in a broader, regional, and international context. Destructive domestic politics are but an echo of international designs and aspirations vis a vis Bosnia and Herzegovina, that are rooted in causes for 1992-1995 war. Such politics, which seek to divide our country, or to exert complete influence over its governing, were dormant for a period when the broader international context was not receptive to them.

That same period saw the greatest institutional achievements and progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The progress was so impressive that there were serious plans to close the Office of the High Representative and draw down completely the international military presence. Unfortunately, such designs were severely premature, and the spectre of destructive, divisive politics returned with a vengeance.

This stagnation created an opportunity for outside players, Russia to be specific, to exert its malign influence to sow further instability in the region by stoking the nationalist flames and irredentist ideas thus opening another crisis spot that the West must contend with. Their true designs were laid bare in an act of unprovoked and brutal aggression against Ukraine. It would be foolhardy to think that they would shy away from opening another “hot conflict” on the European soil to advance their interests.

In such challenging domestic and international environment, it has become increasingly difficult for our country, and dare I say the whole Western Balkans region, to progress on the EU path. The overall movement of the region has been slow, inconsistent, and fraught with new challenges. This situation had a doubly negative effect – a decreasing allure of the EU membership for both citizens and politicians, and an opening to alternative international offers of political, economic, and military association and cooperation.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU Commission's Avis from May 2019, containing 14 priority areas for reforms, has been seen as the most important document since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. It defined for a country a moment of political and historic crossroads. Our country has three options now. The first option is for Bosnia and Herzegovina to pursue reforms in 14 key areas and measures to speed up its EU accession process, but also to transform the society into a liberal democratic state of equal citizens protected by the Rule of Law. Implementation of the 14 priorities would set our country irreversibly on the European path and would ensure that each individual has equal rights and opportunities, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, race or other identity.

The second option is to keep the status quo. I believe that you are aware of the current situation which can be best described as stagnating, frustrating and unbearable for ordinary people. Unbearable because our institutions are kept dysfunctional, and the citizens subjected to rhetoric aimed at raising ethnic tensions. Divisive rhetoric serves to disguise incompetence and corruption leading to a massive exodus of young people. It is not surprising that such rhetoric only increased after the Commission's 14 priorities opinion. Certain political elements pay lip service to EU-led reform agenda, but actively work to subvert it, thus keeping the status quo.

Russia has always been one of the most vociferous supporters of the status quo – exactly because it preserved the "frozen conflict," and acting as an international supporter to those domestic actors who wish for the same. Russia's brinkmanship in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be clearly seen at the UN Security Council, where yearly extension of the EUFOR ALTHEA mission is due next month, and Russia may put a veto to the extension, unless it secures certain concessions. That must not be allowed – international military presence is an absolutely priority. In case of a Russian veto, there are already present legal arrangements for foreign troops to remain in Bosnia and Herzegovina under either EUFOR or NATO umbrella.

The third option for our country is to further regress – which could lead to a renewed conflict. Whether that will happen depends on whether our country has continued with the institutional deepening of the ethnic divide, i.e. whether ethnic divisions are further enshrined in the Constitutional and legal framework. The current framework is already dominated by ethno-centric approach based on the concept of "constitutive peoples." It is a concept that continues to produce political strife and institutional dysfunctionality. It is also a discriminatory legal framework as confirmed by several rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Further deepening of ethnic division through legal framework – especially in regards to the Election Law – may temporarily satisfy a few political appetites threatening with chaos, but it will provide for greater instability and dysfunctionality in the long term. And it will permanently close the EU door to our country.

I hope that Ireland and the EU will resist the siren's song of providing more concessions to those seeking to extend the status quo through institutionalized ethnic sectarianism and help Bosnia and Herzegovina transform into a vibrant democratic, pluralistic society that lives by the same norms and values as every EU member state. That is the only path to permanent peace, stability, and prosperity for our country, region and broader EU neighbourhood. Thank you very much.