

Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative/High Representative in BiH: “BiH cannot be held hostage by Kosovo”

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Dnevni list: The Office of the High Representative expressed its concern over the failure to adopt the State Budget. Are you afraid this might be a prelude to a deeper political crisis?

Miroslav Lajčák: The fact that the budget has not been adopted even at the second attempt is certainly bad news and, of course, it could slow down the development of institutions of crucial importance for BiH. As things stand right now, it is realistic to expect that such institutions will be under tremendous pressure to implement a one-year program within a maximum of nine months.

The situation is serious, and I hope that we will not see another failure to adopt the budget, at the third attempt. That would most certainly send a very negative message to the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Council of Ministers and the Presidency of BiH must work in close cooperation to come up with a proposal that will finally be adopted by the Presidency and sent into parliamentary procedure.

Dnevni list: The current situation demonstrates the necessity to negotiate and find compromise, and for a greater level of coordination between the BiH Presidency and the Council of Ministers.

Miroslav Lajčák: There is some kind of a lull on the political scene in BiH, at least when it comes to talks about the Constitution. Some analysts claim this is caused by the fact that everyone is waiting for the resolution of the Kosovo issue. Silajdžić even said it would make no sense to participate in meetings before the problem of this region is resolved. In your opinion, is it perhaps better to wait for a while, until there is no more cause for comparison between Kosovo and BiH?

If it is indeed true that there is a lull, as you say, then let us hope it is a sign that political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina are seriously approaching the job of preparing their proposals for reform of the Constitution, because that is certainly one of the crucial issues.

With regard to the status of Kosovo: On a psychological level Kosovo will have an impact on the atmosphere, not just on BiH but across the region. On the other hand, there is not a single issue related to BiH's future that depends on Kosovo and BiH is not a hostage of Kosovo. Any artificial attempts to link Kosovo's future to that of Bosnia and Herzegovina must be rejected. BiH has its own challenges and problems, at the same time BiH holds the key to its own solutions.

Dnevni list: There have been speculations in the media about “radical measures” that the Peace Implementation Council plans to take. Are there any such indications, and will the talks with political party leaders in Brussels be conducted in a “harsh” atmosphere?

Miroslav Lajčák: Media speculations, if they exist, are only speculations. What is certain however is that the Peace Implementation Council will meet on 26 and 27 February in Brussels and, certainly, the overall situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be analysed at this meeting. It remains to be seen what kind of conclusions the PIC will adopt.

Dnevni list: Another worrying piece of information is that the legal framework for police reform will not be finished by the end of February. Do you believe that we will get this document within the deadline?

Miroslav Lajčák: I expect the working group to agree draft legislation that will fulfil the commitments made by the six party leaders in their Mostar declaration and subsequently in their Laktaši agreement. When the Council of Ministers established the working group they set a deadline of 15 February.

If the political leaders of BiH truly want to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in the first half of this year, they know what they need to do. Of course, the European Union stands ready to support progress in the implementation of the reform program.

Dnevni list: It is impossible to ask you questions without mentioning Milorad Dodik. He “grazes” you and attacks publicly almost every day. Sometimes we are under the impression that he is frustrated with your presence, and that perhaps he even hates you. What is your impression?

Miroslav Lajčák: It is a well-known fact that Prime Minister Dodik wants OHR to leave BiH as soon as possible, so some of his statements should be viewed and interpreted in light of that fact. I do not think that these attacks, as you call them, are focused against me personally, but rather against the institution that I represent.

Dnevni list: Could you comment on Dodik’s opinion that you have brought BiH into a state of chaos with your Decisions and that you should leave BiH?

Miroslav Lajčák: I believe it is clear to everyone that the political crisis that occurred at the end of last year was artificially created, because it was convenient for some local politicians, and it was not caused by my Decisions. The evidence to support that claim is the speed with which this same crisis ended.

However, the very fact that such an atmosphere was indeed created gives the international community something to think about. Fortunately, neither Prime Minister Dodik nor anyone else among BiH politicians decides on how long OHR will stay in BiH. It is the Peace Implementation Council that decides on the termination of OHR’s and the High Representative’s mandate.

But at the same time I want to emphasise that the international community does not want OHR to stay in BiH indefinitely. When the international community becomes certain that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not need OHR, then no one will want to keep the High Representative or his powers unnecessarily.

Dnevni list: Do you agree with Dodik that the Army of BiH is a “caricature” and that it should be abolished?

Miroslav Lajčák: I do not agree. While everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, it is a fact that mine clearance experts from BiH in Iraq are representing BiH in the most positive way.

However, if there are arguments to support such a claim – and I have not heard them yet – then they exist because the people who agreed this reform are now blocking its implementation. I am especially referring here to the decision on military property. The defence property transfer process, agreed to in July 2007 by State and Entity Prime Ministers, must move forward.

I expect all leaders in BiH to fulfil their obligations and thus enable the defence reform process to move forward without further delays.

Dnevni list: Recently you talked to entity prime ministers. How do you evaluate their work and what did minister Hećo write to you about?

Miroslav Lajčák: At this point, I think they need to focus most of their attention on the worrying trend of price rises, because that is the most serious problem for citizens. Essentially, these price increases are a result of price rises on the worldwide market, but due to the fact that BiH mainly relies on imports it is more affected than other countries. Much can be done to improve this situation. BiH has a strategy for economic reform, and it is the Action Plan adopted on 16 October 2007. Everyone supported this plan, and now the international community and the BiH public expect them to deliver on what they signed. So far they have not done much.

With regard to the scandal over appointments to the Supervisory Board of Elektroprivreda BiH and the selection process of strategic partners that has been unravelling in the media over the last ten days: I replied to Minister Hećo’s letter this week to express my concern over the political discord and the possible ramifications this may have for the reform of the energy sector. OHR will continue to support the energy sector reform process but the primary responsibility for its implementation rests with the BiH authorities.

Dnevni list: Soon it will be a full year since you took office and we would like to hear your impression, more specifically can local leaders agree on important issues at all?

Miroslav Lajčák: I have been here for almost seven months, but during this period I witnessed a very wide range of BiH politics. It is encouraging that during the last few months political leaders demonstrated that they can find compromise and that they are ready for agreement. I hope it will stay this way, because BiH has much more work ahead this year if it wants finally to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Dnevni list: In comments of foreign diplomats, for example the Russian ambassador, very often we can hear opinions that Europe should accelerate the process of accepting BiH into its family, and only after that work together with BiH to eliminate problems and fulfil standards. What do you think about that?

Miroslav Lajčák: I personally believe that countries of the Western Balkans must have a European perspective and that the EU should be very accommodating towards these countries, including BiH. The European Union must be realistic in its demands, it should not pose unrealistic requirements that cannot be fulfilled and that, consequently, only have a discouraging effect. On the other hand, progress towards the EU must be deserved. The EU perspective was not a free gift for anyone. The EU should motivate them, and the countries in this region must deserve their progress.

I was in Brussels at the start of the week for a series of meetings, including a meeting with Javier Solana. The message I got was positive; the EU is already looking at possible dates on which the SAA could be signed with BiH. At the same time, BiH must show that that is what it wants by doing its homework, and the top issue there is police reform.