

Miroslav Lajčák's exclusive interview for www.reci.ba: «New EU strategy for BiH»

What are the conclusions of today's Brussels meeting of the EU Council of Ministers?

The very fact that EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Defense must discuss Bosnia and Herzegovina shows the gravity of the situation. It has been emphasized on a number of occasions that the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement was a big and positive step in the relations between the EU and BiH. However, attacks on state institutions, threats of unilateral change to the constitutional order of the country and nationalist rhetoric have compromised further progress and the situation in the country has gone in a completely wrong direction. Let me just remind you that, after signing the Agreement with the EU, each country nearly immediately saw a positive effect in terms of trade and investments. I am afraid that politicians have ruined this initial positive effect. No-one is interested in cooperation with a country in which political situation is unpredictable and unstable.

In today's meeting in Brussels, ministers also discussed a proposal for an EU strategy for BiH, which was prepared by Javier Solana and Olli Rehn. What today's situation in the country shows is that it is not possible to apply the standard EU enlargement strategy in BiH, but the European Union itself must be engaged proactively.

It was reiterated that the membership perspective was still open and that the European Union expected the whole of BiH to move onwards.

There have been speculations recently that the European Union

will end its military mission. Was that a matter of discussion, too?

Yes, of course. In this meeting, the Foreign and Defense Ministers decided together that all EU organizations in BiH were necessary and that any changes to the EUFOR mandate were possible only after a positive assessment of the political situation in the country.

You mentioned a document prepared jointly by Javier Solana, EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and Olli Rehn, EU's Enlargement Commissioner, which is about the future policy of the European Union in BiH. What are their recommendations?

First of all, the goal of the international community and the European Union remains the same: Bosnia and Herzegovina as a stable, peaceful, multiethnic state, irreversibly on the road to EU membership.

In the document which was received positively by the ministers, Javier Solana and Olli Rehn analyzed the future engagement of the European Union in BiH after the OHR-EUSR transition. Their recommendation was that, when the time comes, the European Union must be ready to strengthen its presence and the mandate of the EUSR must be adjusted to the needs on the ground. Moreover, they think that the functions of the EUSR and the EC Delegation should merge, which would ensure that the European Union resolves the issues facing BiH in the most efficient way. They also believe that it is necessary to promote more strongly the advantages of the European road for all citizens. It is clear to us all that there is a great deal of support in BiH to its future membership, but this support needs to turn into concrete engagement of all segments of the society.

In what way could such EU promotion be realized?

First of all, citizens of BiH should be given all necessary

information with regard to the OHR-EUSR transformation. The European Union must explain to the broad public and political leaders in detail its role in the country and conditions and criteria for further progress towards BiH's membership in the EU. What everyone must understand is that the essence of this process is that the country adopts legislation and methods of functioning of the EU member countries, rather than only having good will and desire for this membership.

Activities in this area are already in progress. In the period between February and June this year, I personally initiated a debate with BiH citizens on the importance of EU accession and about how BiH can prepare best for the challenge of European integration. These debates which were conducted in 17 towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be very useful, because they represented a forum where the citizens themselves had an opportunity to give their opinions and views.

Also, in order to extend the dialogue with citizens, we established a webpage www.reci.ba and gave citizens another opportunity to make their voice heard. We informed citizens through this website about debates to be held in various towns in BiH, and we also made our way into BiH citizens' homes. On this webpage, citizens can put questions to me, as the EU Special Representative, to which I try to give answers.

During the next several days we will be launching new activities. We start a dialogue with certain groups, e.g. parliamentarians, NGOs, civil society representatives and young people.

We have invited MPs from EU countries to talk to their BiH colleagues and exchange opinions on the reforms that BiH must go through on its road to the European Union on the role of the parliaments in the European integration process.

It is of key importance to encourage interest and inform representatives of key sectors, e.g. SME owners, public

administration employees, farmers, young people and so on, so that they can become generators and promoters of the European future for BiH.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is once again high on the list of priorities of the international community and European Union. Is that good or bad for BiH?

At one moment, in fact after the SAA was signed, there was a positive momentum in BiH and it seemed that the country was on the right track; some in the international community held the view that BiH could meet its remaining responsibilities with a much weaker presence of the international community.

Unfortunately, that momentum was lost very soon and the responsibility for that lies with the political leaders in BiH, who, instead of concentrating on the remaining reforms that should have been carried out, wasted time in empty nationalist rhetoric and irresponsible moves.

In the last two months I spoke with the foreign ministers of member countries of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) and informed them in detail about the current situation in the country, about where we now stand when it comes to meeting the requirements of the PIC, which is necessary for the transition of the OHR into the EUSR and how much the country has done or not done in comparison to what it is expected to do in the EU integration process. It was necessary to bring back the attention of the international community to BiH and we have succeeded in doing that.

Of course it would have been better had Bosnian authorities at all levels done their work and had there been no delay in reforms. Today BiH would have been much further along the process of EU integration.

The PIC will be in session at the end of November. When will the OHR be closed? Have the preconditions been met?

The OHR will be closed, or transformed in the Office of the European Union Special Representative once all five objectives and two conditions that the Peace Implementation Council put before BiH in February of this year have been met.

In its next session, the Council will consider the overall situation in the country and the progress that has been made. A lot has already been done but you know that the constitutional status of Brčko has not been resolved. So five of two set goals have not been met.

Furthermore, in a situation in which state institutions are being attacked, in which Republika Srpska does not comply with the laws, I will certainly not be able to recommend the closure of the OHR. Those who sincerely want that to happen must work on positive steps instead of raising tensions. Raising tensions has never benefited anyone, and any talk about secession from BiH or abolishing the entities is just hot air.

Everybody in BiH must be sure that the international community and the European Union do not want the OHR to stay here one day longer than necessary, but they must meet their obligations. To use sport jargon, the ball is now in their court.

On 8 November the leaders of three major political parties in the country agreed on many open issues. Will that change the situation in the country?

What the international community expects from local politicians is constructive approach to the resolution of problems. This is evidence that compromise is possible when there is readiness for open dialogue. The agreement that was reached by Sulejman Tihić, Dragan Čović and Milorad Dodik could resolve the issues that are crucial for the progress of this country and speed up its European road. The solutions on which they agreed with regard to the constitution, state

property, population census and Brčko District are very close to the recommendations that the international community gave. Now it is crucial that they agreement be implemented through institutions.

One can often hear claims that the constitutional reform is one of the requirements for the closure of the OHR and EU membership? Is that true?

The reform of the BiH Constitution is not a requirement for the closure of the OHR, but it is for EU membership. However, the European Union does not have a model constitution that it tries to impose on BiH.

Local leaders and the European Union agree that Bosnia-Herzegovina needs constitutional changes. The reason for that is very simple: BiH cannot aspire towards membership in the EU with the existing constitution that has the capacity of blocking the country in adopting or implementing the laws of the European Union, which breaches European standards of human rights in numerous aspects. Because there is no open discussion on this issue, the other reforms are on hold and that is why I believe that serious talks on constitutional reform should start as soon as possible. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a complex multi-ethnic state on the way to the European Union and that is why it has to find a constitutional solution that will make a fast implementation of reforms possible and at the same time protect all citizens and constituent people.