



Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák to Foreign Affairs Committee Chairpersons of EU Member State Parliaments

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Necessary Next Step

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was the Nobel Peace Prize-winner from Northern Ireland, John Hume, who described the European Union as “the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution.”

He was referring to the way in which the EU had brought together former antagonists after the Second World War and then, in later years, how EU integration helped to reconcile the interests and aspirations of the two communities on the island of Ireland.

I believe that Hume's observation has particular significance for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and not just in the general sense that as the countries of the Western Balkans are integrated in the Union, the bitterness and enmity created by the break-up of former Yugoslavia can be subsumed.

Specifically, the process of European integration is the necessary next step in Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war recovery. It is the political, economic and social instrument that can replace the executive powers of the International Community vested in the High Representative.

When the present situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is viewed in these terms, many elements in the country's political and social transition begin to fall into place.

Thirteen years after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed we are at a crucial and very delicate point in Bosnia and Herzegovina's transition.

On the one hand the country's institutions have demonstrated that they have the ability to take necessary decisions that have opened the way to initialling the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. On the other hand, however, we have seen how quickly political crises can flare up and bring the machinery of government to a standstill.

The most recent example of a debilitating crisis followed the resolution adopted by the Republika Srpska National Assembly, claiming that the Entity has the right to secede from BiH.

At the meeting of the Peace Implementation Council in Brussels, the RS Prime Minister assured the International Community that this was simply a case of deputies venting their anger over Kosovo's UDI, and he argued that the threats of secession are not real and are only conditional on the behaviour of others.

Even if the threat is conditional, it is serious. We cannot ignore the potential impact of such threats in a country where memories of bloodshed are still fresh.

As a reaction on the other side we saw statements from the SDA, one of the two leading Bosniak parties, claiming that they are the defenders of Bosnia and Herzegovina – and that “those who do not like the country should leave”.

The Bosniak side has also been increasingly vocal in criticizing the International Community for not reacting strongly enough to the RSNA resolution and other statements from the RS side.

The main reason for this continuing dichotomy is the lack of a common consensus on the country's past, present and future among the three constituent peoples.

In theory, it should be possible to reconcile their separate stances. In practice, each of the peoples' political leadership is still not looking for the lowest common denominator to find a mutually acceptable solution, but clearly wants to impose its own vision. The legacy of war and the logic of nationally based and zero-sum politics make any significant compromise profoundly difficult.

The only way permanently to address these deep-rooted problems is through a serious internal debate on a constitutional arrangement that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina can agree on.

However, until now attempts to launch a constitutional debate have resulted in an escalation of political tension and a corresponding stalling of the broader reform agenda.

What is our response to this problem? How do we make sure that the country builds on the positive political momentum that has been established over the long-term not least through the positive incentives created by the prospect of deeper European integration?

At last month's meeting of the Peace Implementation Council, the International Community showed absolute unanimity on the way forward; there were no dissenting voices – not from Russia, not from the US, not from the EU or any of the member organisations. The PIC reaffirmed Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity and it restated the ultimate objective, which is to create a peaceful, viable state irreversibly on course for European integration.

For the last two years the International Community has been adamant that the way forward is closure of the Office of the High Representative and transition to an EU mission led by the European Union Special Representative.

At its February meeting the PIC laid out the steps that must be taken before the OHR can be closed. It gave the authorities five benchmarks through which they can demonstrate that they have the capability and commitment to assume full responsibility for governing Bosnia and Herzegovina.

They must resolve the issue of State Property and Defence Property; they must complete the implementation of the Brcko Final Award; they must set in place the necessary administrative and legal structures to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the state; and they must demonstrate that the rule of law has become entrenched in the politics, the administration and the daily life of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition the PIC will not consider closure of the OHR until the EU has signed an SAA, and until the PIC itself has made a positive assessment of the overall security situation.

The aim of this transition is achieving an end state, not fixing an end date.

Transition from the High Representative to an EU Special Representative will mean the end of the International Community's executive powers, which for more than a decade have allowed High Representatives to prevent obstruction of the peace process and accelerate the pace of recovery.

Closing the OHR is just one part of Bosnia and Herzegovina's transition to the status of a fully functioning democracy. The other part involves setting in place the structures that can ensure that the peace process continues and the pace of post-war recovery is maintained.

It can be summed up in one word: Europe.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, European integration is not only the logical successor of international intervention – it is the new template of political life.

The integration process, in every sense, reflects unity rather than division – it is predicated on a common undertaking to achieve clear and realizable goals that will deliver substantial benefits in the medium and long term.

All of us whose work brings us into contact with the political establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina can do a great service to the country by maintaining the focus on the integration agenda. This agenda is a blueprint that will help this country to make a break from its recent violent past.

As the European Union prepares to assume a more responsible role for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one step will be to strengthen and streamline the EU presence in the country by combining the mandates of the EUSR and the head of the European Commission Delegation. This consolidated office will be able to help maintain Bosnia and Herzegovina's momentum towards full EU integration more effectively.

Assuming this new responsibility in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents an unprecedented foreign-policy challenge for the EU, and Member States need to think seriously about how this challenge can best be met. It is not simply a matter of establishing a new and more powerful Mission – it is a complex task that will require political as well as financial resources.

Our Common Foreign and Security Policy and its offshoot the European Security and Defence Policy have been developed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We will also need to examine the order and interrelationship of our various instruments – EUSR, EC, EUPM and EUFOR acting in unison – in a post-Bonn Powers Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is important not only for Bosnia and Herzegovina but for the future foreign-policy direction and instruments of the European Union.

Let me be very clear: Bosnia and Herzegovina is so specific in many different and challenging ways that it requires a modified and carefully worked out approach by the EU.

As the momentum of Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration increases so too will the traction of EU conditionality and reward.

This is why in my capacity as EU Special Representative I have launched a campaign that will create a platform for intensive consultation with the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina on how they see their European future and how this future can be turned into present reality. Over the next two months I will meet citizens from sixteen towns across the country to discuss directly with them what the EU integration process involves and what it can deliver. The consultation process is also ongoing on the internet, where a website has been created among other things to facilitate a popular online debate, in which I will actively participate. The campaign is co-organised with local NGOs, thus giving the interested stakeholders a vested interest in participation.

Tangible progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration in Europe will bolster popular pro-European sentiment, creating a virtuous cycle. Right now, EU integration is the single most important goal shared by all citizens.

It is a fact – and certainly an unfortunate fact when viewed from the perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina – that the focus of EU attention on the Western Balkans is currently on Kosovo and Serbia. This is, of course, understandable, but at the same time it is important that the EU does not take its eye off Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is well advanced on the path to long-term stability. It has been the subject of a massive EU economic and diplomatic investment. Now is not the time to forget Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now is the time to highlight and promote the country's European perspective – the best example of conflict resolution in history.

Thank you