

Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, High Representative/EU Special Representative in BiH: “EU image in Bosnia intact, says international envoy”



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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS – The desire to be part of the EU is still very popular amongst all Bosnians, despite Kosovo’s recent declaration of independence and the anti-Western protests that followed in Republika Srpska – Bosnia’s Serb entity – the international community’s high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina has said.

In an interview with EUobserver on Tuesday (4 March), Miroslav Lajcak, who is also the EU’s special representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), said: “The European perspective is an idea that enjoys extremely high support among the populations [in Bosnia and Herzegovina] across ethnic lines and entity borders.”

According to Mr Lajcak, the Bosnian Serb protests following Kosovo’s declaration of independence were “isolated events”

and do not represent a long-lasting trend or a shift in sentiment towards the bloc.

“The sentiment among the citizens of Republika Srpska is something which we don’t ignore of course, and it’s something we can understand. At the same time, I don’t see any negative impact on the EU image or on the EU perspective among the citizens of BiH, including RS,” he noted.

This pro-European feeling among the Bosnians must be cultivated, the international envoy stressed, welcoming recent statements by the European Commission that people-to-people contacts between EU citizens and citizens from the Western Balkans need to be encouraged.

Brussels is to present a series of proposals today (5 March) including offering more scholarships to students of the region, and stressing the importance of achieving full visa liberalisation.

“I would definitely encourage such an approach,” Mr Lajcak said, adding that his team had also launched an EU awareness campaign in Bosnia on 14 February “to make an impact and to make people more aware of what the European perspective actually means for them.”

The calls for secession ‘will be stopped very soon’

Nevertheless, following Kosovo’s declaration of independence last month, calls for secession came from some segments of Republika Srpska, while the Bosnian Serb parliament warned it would consider a referendum to secede from Bosnia if a significant number of UN countries recognised Kosovo’s independence.

According to the top diplomat however, “apart from possible actions of some irresponsible individuals I expect no

significant impact [of Kosovo's declaration of independence] on the situation in BiH."

The calls for secession "must be stopped and will be stopped soon," he stressed, adding: "I can do a lot and I am supposed to do a lot to stop these."

Mr Lajcak's post as an international representative – or High Representative – in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was enshrined in the peace treaty ending the 1992-1995 Bosnia war, the so-called Dayton Agreements.

Since 1997 the High Representative may also impose legislation and sack officials judged to be obstructing the peace implementation process.

But while stressing that he was keeping "all options open", Mr Lajcak who has been occupying the post since July 2007, said that using these so-called Bonn powers remained for him a move of "last resort".

International presence in Bosnia will not remain 'forever'

The very existence of the Bonn powers has been criticised by some analysts and commentators, saying that they were contributing to transforming the country into an international protectorate unable to survive on its own.

But Mr Lajcak denied claims that his office could remain in BiH "forever".

"Time is coming for BiH to take over responsibility for its own future," he said.

The next meeting of the countries supervising Bosnia since the end of the war in 1995 will take place in June to review progress achieved by Sarajevo towards self-government, and

“reconfirm or eventually redesign” the international community’s approach towards Bosnia.

“But generally speaking I may say even now that we are talking about months and not years,” regarding the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

The OHR was planned to close in June last year, but it was subsequently extended, as Bosnia was not judged ready to govern itself.

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