Lajčák before the BiH Parliament: “Integration or isolation!”

Integration or isolation is the choice before Bosnia and Herzegovina this autumn, the High Representative and EU Special Representative, Miroslav Lajčák warned today in an address to the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country’s most important strategic goal is progress on the road to Europe, he said in his message to politicians.

Commenting on the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the High Representative and EU Special Representative invited the political establishment to finally end the practice of questioning the existence of the state and its component parts, noting that the constitutional arrangement could only be changed through the procedures prescribed in the Constitution itself. “No one can secede unilaterally and no one can do away unilaterally with the entities or any other constitutional feature”, Lajčák said.

Speaking of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the High Representative reiterated that it would not be signed without agreement on the police reform, which should be in accordance with the three known principles.

He emphasized that police reform should not be used to resolve all the problems the country is faced with – from war crimes to the future constitutional setup. “We should not deny the

existence of problems. They are here and are serious and relevant (…) Inclusion of all the country's problems in the process of police reform creates a knot that will be impossible to untie", Miroslav Lajčák warned.

Acceptance or rejection of the agreement will be a "clear signal of maturity of leading politicians in this country and their readiness to lead BiH in a civilized and European way". Were the plan to be rejected, it would be politically naive to think that there would be no reaction of the international community, which would have to change its policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina as a result.

The High Representative pointed out a series of economic and other advantages the SAA would bring to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

By signing the agreement, BiH would take the first step in the European integration process and confirm its prospects for EU membership. BiH would, for instance, be able to export its products customs-free to a market of nearly 500 million potential consumers. At the same time, the country would retain customs duties on EU products for a transition period and use this time to strengthen its domestic economy.

On the other hand, the harmonisation of BiH laws with EU will mean better consumer protection, equal opportunities for all people, safety of food and other products, more efficient public services, and more transparent spending of taxpayers' money.

Constitutional reform will follow the resolution of police reform, the High Representative announced. "The objective is simple: to provide this country with a feasible, affordable and effective system of governance. That is a long-term goal, but progress can only ever be achieved through consensus". He concluded that such a willingness for consensus did not yet exist.

A high price was being paid for the country's lack of progress, Lajčák said. "Only in 2006, this country lost 100 million dollars worth of World Bank funding, because it failed to satisfy the conditions that were set."

In the economic field, Lajčák stressed the urgent need to create a Social and Economic Council and establish an efficient dialogue between economic stakeholders and the government. The High Representative and EU Special Representative announced that he would convene a conference on the economy next month, bringing together policymakers and representatives of workers, employers, entrepreneurs and consumers. "The lesson from other transition countries, including my own, is that it is quite unreasonable to expect citizens to undergo pain without the expectation of some kind of recognisable gain… We need economic reforms that work."

"Victims' families cannot wait forever to obtain satisfaction before the courts," Lajčák said, turning to the issue of justice and war crimes, and added: "There is no prosperous society without a feeling of justice." For the country to address the past, it is necessary to adopt a state strategy for work on war crime cases as soon as possible and sign bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries on the exchange of evidence and information related to war crimes. Lajčák also called for the adoption of a Strategy for the Reform of the Judiciary in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for which political support is still lacking.

Regarding the issue of state property, the High Representative and EU Special Representative urged the state, entities and Brčko District to agree upon and enter into an agreement on the division of all assets required for the exercise of their respective constitutional competencies.

Miroslav Lajčák called upon parliamentarians to choose integration instead of isolation: "Let me reassure you that for my part I will do everything I can … to bring the ongoing

reform processes to a successful conclusion. I firmly believe it is in the interest of this country, both its Entities and all its citizens.”