

Remarks for the panel discussion on Bosnia and Herzegovina: Towards its European Future



Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, let me express my thanks to SAIS and the Center for Transatlantic Relations. It is my great pleasure to join this discussion on how Bosnia and Herzegovina might move forwards more decisively towards its Euro-Atlantic future.

The process of moving closer to the European Union is one which will inevitably bring stability and prosperity to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is why progress on the EU path remains the stated goal of Bosnian leaders from all ethnic communities.

Recently we have seen some initial steps in this direction, but much more needs to be done.

As we have already heard, the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are currently working towards completing the EU Questionnaire, a very important part in the overall accession process. The Stabilization and Association Agreement is in force and subcommittee meetings are already taking place. A transport treaty was recently signed and will eventually open the door for infrastructure improvements.

* * *

This is the good part. However, there are also challenges, which need to be addressed. Otherwise they will hamper the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process. I would like to flag the most important ones today.

The first relates to elections. Current disagreements over changes in the election of delegates to the Federation House of Peoples need to be resolved ahead of next year's elections to ensure that new governments can be formed quickly. Otherwise economic reforms and EU integration will suffer.

At the moment, the political parties who should be negotiating this issue in good faith are taking maximalist positions, designed to score points voters, which will not lead to a solution.

Next year's elections need to take place and they need to be implemented without significant delays.

The second issue, which I would like to highlight today is respect for the Dayton Peace Agreement, in particular Annex 4, which is the constitution.

Statements by some leaders in the Republika Srpska questioning the future existence of the country and rejecting the authority of state-level institutions, including the decisions of the highest courts, are destabilizing and they make reforms increasingly more difficult.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a decentralized country and will remain so, barring constitutional changes agreed to be all ethnic groups. But to say that there is no state of Bosnia and Herzegovina or to deny the authorities of the state in areas like foreign policy and inter-entity law enforcement is untrue and harmful to reconciliation and future reform.

The third issue which I wish to highlight today is fundamental

and that is a deterioration in respect for the rule of law.

We see it at the most senior political levels, when elected officials ignore court decisions or even declare that they will not implement them.

This includes the continued failure to implement the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights in the “Sejdic & Finci” and related cases. As a result, under the current system, certain groups have been discriminated against for over two decades in their right to hold political office.

And in the city of Mostar citizens have been unable to elect local representatives during the last two electoral cycles, because the two main political parties in the city have been unwilling to implement the constitutional court’s decision on the electoral system in Mostar.

One final example: some of the cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have failed to amend their constitutions to include language guaranteeing the status of Serbs and the Serb language, despite a legal requirement to do so since 2002.

All of these issues need to be addressed.

And problems with the rule of law go much deeper, in terms of corruption in the political system, in the large public sector and in the provision of basic services to the public.

These deficiencies in the rule of law contribute to the huge exodus of talented young people from the country. And they strengthen the forces of nationalism and division.

The Dayton Peace Agreement defines Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state governed by the “rule of law” and I believe that we as an international community need to reengage and reinvigorate our efforts to buttress the rule of law, including through stronger anti-corruption efforts.

* * *

Despite these and other challenges, I do not think we should be despondent about the future for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

First of all, let us not forget that when we were ambitious in the past, we achieved amazing results; a bit more than a decade ago a remarkably high degree of political consensus enabled the country to deliver groundbreaking progress on issues like Defense Reform and the Value Added Tax system, without which the country would probably not have managed the fiscal challenges it continues to face.

These and many other examples from that period confirm, major change is absolutely possible when there is the political will to do so.

* * *

So what needs to change?

To begin with, the elected leaders who have declared their commitment to EU integration, need to step back from polarized positions and search for the compromises needed to adopt necessary reforms.

I believe that in the long term voters will reward this approach, because it is the only way to bring about membership in the European Union, something the vast majority supports.

From the side of the international community, I believe that we need to support those who follow a constructive path, but also to speak out clearly against attempts to roll back the progress made in integrating Bosnia and Herzegovina and its peoples.

We should support all those who demonstrate a true commitment to making BiH a stable, functional and prosperous country, irreversibly integrated into Euroatlantic structures.

* * *

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us be optimistic and ambitious again and let us once again really get this country moving forwards decisively.

Thank you!