

Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative/High Representative for BiH “BiH is not a hostage of Kosovo”



International administrator Miroslav Lajcak has a two-hatted function in Sarajevo

He has more power than many heads of states. The Slovak diplomat can change laws in Bosnia and Herzegovina and even remove a president. The position of the High Representative of the international community gives him these capacities. There is another function written on Miroslav Lajcak's business card. As a Special Representative of the European Union he has the ability to lead BiH forward with the discreet help of the attraction of Europe. "I have these two hats and I will constantly be wearing one of them. I won't have both of them under the table, or sit with my arms folded and watch what's happening here," he stated for Pravda.

Q: What happened so that everybody, after six weeks of the deepest crisis in post-war Bosnia, reached an agreement in three days and signed what they had to sign?

A: My personal opinion is that this was not the deepest post-war crisis. The situation was also radicalized because of

irresponsible rhetoric on the part of many politicians. It was precisely these politicians who used expressions such as the deepest crisis in the twelve years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement; they were even talking about a threat of war. The international community reacted to such statements and suddenly the politicians got a little scared of what they had started. At the same time they realized that we had halted the negotiations on police reform and that we had said that if they were not ready enough for this step that we would not be pushing them in that direction.

Q: The European Union has conditioned the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement specifically on unification of the law enforcement authorities in the Bosniak-Croat federation and Republika Srpska. Did Bosnian politicians get scared of the fact that the European perspective was moving away from them?

A: It led to the fact that Bosnian politicians were making efforts to get on the side of the European idea even at the time of crisis. They proposed initiatives, the advantage of which lay in the fact that these were original home-grown products, with political legitimacy, confirmed by the signatures of all six leaders of the governing coalition. For instance, they have given themselves a six-month deadline to implement the agreement on police reorganization.

Q: Even before this agreement, Bosnian Serbs were accusing you of wanting to deprive them of the guarantee that they could not be outvoted by Bosniaks and Croats in the state parliament.

A: My decision was not directed against Republika Srpska. The goal was to complicate the lives of those who want to obstruct the work of the Government and Parliament. All constitutional guarantees remain unchanged, but in case that someone wants to vote against something, then it is necessary for them to come and vote against, and not just not appear at all, as has been

the case so far.

Q: The Parliament finally endorsed your reform seven days ago. Was it because they had a knife at their throat? Anyway there were just a few hours left before the expiry of your ultimatum, after which you were ready to force changes by a decree.

A: Of course this had its effect. The expiration of the ultimatum was getting closer, and the position of the international community was very unified and firm. On the other hand, I had preliminary talks in Brussels with the EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn and other representatives on the need for the Union to react to this effort of Bosnia and Herzegovina to desperately join the EU integration process. We agreed that, when politicians had found the internal strength to make an agreement on the parliamentary measures in accordance with my expectations, we should react in an appropriate way. The vision that the solution of the political crisis will mean reaching the European perspective of accession played the key role in the outcome. The result is that a strong pro-European climate was introduced in BiH, which had been absent before.

Q: Did you make an internal decision to reach, ultimately, for your extended powers, the so-called Bonn Powers?

The Bonn Powers are a part of my mandate. One should not speculate about that. Simply, they are a part of the High Representative's competencies. I have said from the beginning that I have no ambition to use them, and I understand these powers as the yellow and red cards that the referee holds in his pocket and I want to use them just as some kind of protection for this state and its interests against all attempts to divert BiH from the right path. It is common knowledge that I prefer to support agreement among local politicians. Everyone must understand that the international community has a responsibility for this state. And I have

these two hats – the High Representative's hat and the EU Special Representative's hat – and I will always have one of them on my head. I will not have them both under the table and sit with my arms folded watching what is going on.

Q: The European Union initialed the SAA with BiH on Tuesday. Until recently, politicians in BiH did not seem to be bothered that their country was the last in the Western Balkans without this kind of link with the EU.

A: This was a paradoxical situation. It really looked like we were pushing them into this integration process. As though Europe itself had greater interest in this than BiH. That was a mistake. On the basis of the Slovakian experience I warned that, they, above all, must want this process. We said at that moment: «Enough, we won't force you into anything», and it all began all of a sudden. They started coming forward with initiatives themselves. Good communication was established between BiH and the EU and now no one doubts that they have to be the more active side in this process. They were also convinced that we would not be deaf and blind in the face of their successes in this process.

Q: There are voices in Europe that it would be best if the Union took all the Western Balkan countries under its wing and led them to maturity. Is the Union considering an accelerated accession of the Balkan countries?

A: Greece had a similar proposal. I personally support the idea that these countries should have a European perspective and that the EU should be as accommodating as possible to these states. I also think, on the basis of the Slovak experience, that progress should also be earned with something. You must understand that no one will give you the EU perspective as a gift – otherwise, it would be too demotivating. We, Slovaks, know how we fought for each new step. In my opinion, the EU should be realistic in its requests. It should not give these countries unrealistic

requirements which they cannot meet and which would discourage them. We must motivate them and they must earn each step forward. This process rests on transformation of the society and approximation to European values, not on the formal status. The status is just an expression of the quality of a certain society.

Q: Does Bosnia's big problem lie in the fact that many citizens do not feel it as their own country, that they feel more like Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats than citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina?

A: In the last three or four days we have also seen some examples of patriotism, of pride for being a part of this country. It is a different matter that during the crisis Bosnian Serbs were accused of wanting to secede. They have now resolutely denied it. Their proclaimed position is that they are a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina and that all they are asking for is that the state respect Republika Srpska's right to exist. They have resolutely rejected a referendum and separatism, things that they had been accused of. On the other hand, loyalty to one's country depends on the citizens' trust, and BiH has eighteen months of negative trends and bad news behind it, which of course reflects negatively on patriotism. I believe nevertheless that we are now in a stage when we have a chance of turning things around. The problems are still here, they are not fewer in number, but resolving them in a more positive atmosphere will contribute to making people feel a deeper loyalty towards their country.

Q: Due to the complex peace agreement, BiH is a very unusual and slow country. A country with less than four million inhabitants has five presidents, 13 governments, 180 ministries and 760 members of legislative authorities. Is it possible for this administrative colossus to be effective?

A: If the predominant feeling is that of mutual mistrust, then they see all this as a kind of insurance. That is why European

integration is also important, so that they understand that a functioning state is a precondition for success. They have to realise that something has to be done with the state as it is, to make it more functional. European integration can help them in that. Thanks to it, they have the opportunity to compare themselves to their neighbours as though looking in a mirror and think about what they need to change and correct.

Q: Should they also change the Dayton Agreement?

A: It is useless saying that if they don't feel the need to do so too. It is already clear to everybody that in the process of European integration they have to have a more modern state, and a more modern state means a more modern constitution.

Q: In the Balkans at the moment there are two main problems – Kosovo and BiH. Serb Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica links these two problems. Are they linked? Will the possible independence of Kosovo cause conflict situations in Bosnia?

A: In this region everything is linked with everything. It is clear that at the political and psychological level Kosovo will have an impact on the atmosphere in the region. We cannot persuade ourselves that that's not the case. On the other hand, there is not a single issue related to its future where Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on Kosovo. There is nothing that would have to influence its progress. BiH is not a hostage of Kosovo. In that sense it is necessary to reject any artificial attempts to link Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. BiH has its own challenges and problems but it has all the solutions in its own hands.