

Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative/High Representative in BiH “BiH must not fall behind its neighbours”

By Antonio Prlenda for Southeast European Times in Sarajevo – 12/01/09

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political environment is standing in the way of progress, High Representative Miroslav Lajcak says. In an interview with SETimes correspondent Antonio Prlenda, Lajcak discussed the hurdles the country will face this year.

Southeast European Times: How would you characterize the current political and economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the possibilities for an agreement on constitutional reform in the near future?

Miroslav Lajčák: Suggestions that a return to violence in BiH is imminent are exaggerated. The fact is that we have been operating in a poisoned political environment since the middle of 2006. It has become the norm, and a means of not getting anything done. Despite signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in June, the priority for the country's leaders has become political confrontation. Reform has been sidelined. The distrust generated in this political climate is epitomized in the two diametrically opposed reports into the fire in the mosque in Fazlagica Kula.

All this reflects very badly on the country. Montenegro has

already applied for candidate status. I expect the other countries in the Western Balkans to follow suit [this year]. It is clear that currently BiH has little to offer in terms of arguments to support a similar application. The challenge next year is therefore to prevent BiH falling further behind its neighbours in the Western Balkans in the EU integration process. Politicians and parliamentarians must focus all their energy on the EU agenda. The international community expects BiH to accelerate reforms needed for EU integration in 2009.

The international community and EU foreign ministers welcomed the joint statement by the presidents of the SDA, SNSD and HDZBiH parties from Prud on November 8th. This process is driven entirely by domestic politicians. One of the key points in this statement is the intention to tackle constitutional reform in a pragmatic manner. These proposals now need to be put into concrete form. I hope that the other parties that have seats in Parliament will recognize the fact that this process has received full backing from the EU.

I have repeatedly stressed that BiH can start the EU integration process with its current constitution but will not be able to complete it. Why? First because BiH's administration is too complex and expensive, it does not live up to the demands of BiH's citizens and it will not stand up to the workload needed for EU integration. Secondly, there is a clear imperative for change in accordance with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission report which states that BiH Constitution is not in line with the Convention on Human Rights and the European Charter on local self-government. It is BiH's responsibility – through its political leadership – to align itself with the common human rights values as set out by the Council of Europe. This is a requirement for EU membership.

SETimes: Is it realistic to expect that the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the EU Force (EUFOR) will wrap up their mandates in 2009?

Miroslav Lajčák: It is certain that the international community does not want OHR to remain in BiH a day longer than necessary. It is also certain that the transformation of OHR into the EU Special Representative (EUSR) office will not happen until the objectives and conditions set by the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in February have been met. In November the PIC again said that no one should expect OHR transition without the objectives and conditions set in February being met.

The next session of PIC will take place in March, when progress will be assessed. 2009 is an important year for BiH for another reason – it offers a rare opportunity for real progress. In 2010, we will once again enter an election year. Experience has shown that politicians will be focused on division – with the aim of keeping their positions – and not on real work. That means that if we fail to make progress in 2009, we face further stagnation, radicalisation, divisions and isolation. I believe that in 2009 citizens of this country can expect concrete measures to raise living standards and accelerate progress along the European road.

SETimes: The Bosniak member of BiH presidency, Haris Silajdzic, and Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik have stuck to their hard-line political rhetoric, despite criticism from the international community. What can be done to convince them to change their tone? Is the international community considering any new strategies in this regard?

Miroslav Lajčák: The international community has had priorities beyond the Western Balkans. I am pleased to say that this is now changing. BiH is once again in the focus of the international community and the EU in particular. On November 10th, the EU foreign ministers gave a clear signal that the EU is ready to enhance its engagement in BiH and eventually take on full responsibility. They adopted a report by [EU security chief] Javier Solana and [Enlargement] Commissioner Olli Rehn outlining an evolving EU policy towards

BiH. This report will be a key document guiding the EU's future engagement. Still under development, this plan will set out the architecture of the EU's future engagement in BiH and is one of the guarantees of the EU's commitment to see BiH as a peaceful and viable state irreversibly on the way to EU membership.

SETimes: How will Dodik's move to present a criminal report against Principal Deputy High Representative Raffi Gregorian impact your working relationship with the RS prime minister? Has your attitude towards Dodik changed?

Miroslav Lajčák: First let me repeat that my deputy, Raffi Gregorian, enjoys my full support and the support of the PIC, and the broader international community. This is simply an attempt to prevent OHR from fulfilling its mandate and represents an attack against state judicial institutions and agencies. It is not in line with the Dayton Agreement, according to which all are obliged to fully cooperate with the High Representative and his staff. The international community has clearly said that such moves will not be tolerated.

When I met Prime Minister Dodik in Banja Luka in mid-December, I told him that I believe this to be a pointless exercise; that he has set himself against the international community needlessly, and that he would achieve much more if he is perceived by the International Community as a partner rather than a problem.

SETimes: What needs to be done in order to achieve a substantial increase in foreign investments in BiH?

Miroslav Lajčák: BiH faces many challenges [this year]. Reform must be unblocked, the country must refocus on job creation, strengthening the rule of law and making the administration more effective. Above all of this looms the spectre of global recession. Only societal change can make a difference to ordinary people's lives. There is one tried and tested

strategy, one which has support from 80% of BiH's citizens, and that is faster integration in the EU.