Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative/High Representative in BiH: “This Year is a Crucial One for BiH”

I wish to send a clear message: the EU can live without BiH * You cannot always expect somebody else to come from the outside and resolve your problems * OHR’s presence in BiH and the status of candidate for EU membership at the same time- these two things are mutually exclusive

What is your plan for 2009?

Miroslav Lajčák: The last year was pretty disappointing considering that nearly nothing was done after the signing of the SAA. To a large extent, 2009 will be the crucial year for BiH. All the countries in the region are making intensive efforts to accelerate their alignment with the European Union.Montenegro has already submitted its application for membership, and Albania is expected to apply within the next couple of months. The Czech Republic, which presently holds the EU Presidency, is speaking about candidate status for Serbia. So, this is the year when BiH will either catch up with the others in the region or stagnate.

By doing so, BiH will be a black hole on the Western Balkans map?

Miroslav Lajčák: I have heard several times that the EU has no choice and BiH will definitely join the Union with the other

countries of the region. Whoever thinks so is very wrong. For years we were neglected more and more while the neighbouring countries progressed.

The political elites of that time used to say – don't worry, the EU cannot leave Slovakia out because of our geopolitical position, it would be too expensive for them to guard such a long border, they need us. And what happened? Isolation! It was only after we realised that they are serious, that we got serious and decided who brings the future and who brings isolation.

I wish to send a clear message: the EU can live without BiH, but BiH cannot progress without integration with the EU. This year is another opportunity for BiH to stop lagging behind other countries of the region. If this stagnation continues, there is a real possibility, or danger, for BiH to be, at the end of 2009, the only country in the region which has not made any progress. And this will have the worst consequences on the lives of citizens. I cannot and I will not allow that to happen!

In 2009, all countries also plan to move closer to meeting the conditions for lifting the visa regime with the EU. We have been hearing for years that the visa regime is a big problem for the citizens of this country. But, today, all the countries working on lifting the visa regime have already met one of the key conditions, which is the biometric passport, while the citizens of this country are still waiting.

I am prepared to assist and channel all my capacities to initiate positive processes, whether it meets the conditions or not.

This is impermissible because in the case of this country stagnation produces frustration, tension and crisis. And this would mean that we go into the election year full of negative

emotions, and then we can expect the election campaign to lead towards further and deeper divisions, radicalization of society, a climate which does not facilitate progress but leads to a precipice and further stagnation. I cannot and will not allow this.

You said you could not allow development of negative tendencies. How are you going to prevent them? Are you or the International Community going to make some concrete moves?

Miroslav Lajčák: Yes, I plan concrete activities. But if anyone thinks that this means that I, instead of the institutions of this country, will simply impose 100,000 pages of European legislation, they live in an illusion. It is a matter of urgency to change the mindset and way of thinking, and this cannot be imposed. Therefore, I say to everyone: the International Community is here and will stay to help you.

Destiny of OHR

Miroslav Lajčák: Also, European integration is a process through which the functioning of a country changes and which requires the active participation of all. It is only you who can change your future for the better, and we can help both financially and with advice as your partner, in building a peaceful, prosperous, stable, European Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Does this mean that the OHR will be closed? Who, after the OHR, will protect the Dayton Agreement in BiH?

Miroslav Lajčák: The future of BiH and the future of the OHR are not one and the same thing. The future of BiH does not depend on when the conditions for the OHR transition will be met, but on how efficiently the institutions of the state function, how quickly laws are adopted in the parliaments, to which you, the citizens, have given legitimacy in a democratic election.

The international community will decide on the time and manner in which it is going to change its engagement in this country. I think it would be much more useful for the politicians to focus more energy on fulfilling their tasks and less on the form of the future presence of the international community in this country. I expect the elected officials in local authorities to start with their own actions – to ask themselves about the personal contribution they have made in order to change the situation for the better, instead of blaming everybody else for failures, primarily the international community and then other political parties, other peoples in BiH.

It is completely clear that the international community is not going to abandon this country. The plan that envisages the leading role for the EU should be seen as a positive challenge and proof that Europe is very serious about its role in the entire region, Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular.

Is Europe ready to assume that role?

Miroslav Lajčák: Of course it is. The European Union is intensively taking preparatory actions. Javier Solana and Olli Rehn presented their vision of the future EU engagement in BiH in November. Everybody should realize that it would be unrealistic to expect – in view of all the problems that world powers have to deal with, such as the Middle East, the international financial and economic crisis, the energy crisis, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – greater engagement of the international community in BiH, as some politicians are theatrically asking for. You cannot always expect somebody else to come from the outside and resolve your problems. That sort of indolence will not get you very far. If you do not focus on specific tasks such as meeting the requirements for the visa free regime and the priorities set forth by the European Partnership, nobody from the outside can do anything

about it.

You cannot ask for the OHR's presence in BiH and the status of a candidate for EU membership at the same time – these two things are mutually exclusive. On the one hand you claim that you are not able to communicate with each other and on the other hand you want to convince us that you are ready to identify solutions in discussions with 27 EU members.

BiH defined the European perspective as a key strategic objective more than eight years ago, and it is a common objective for more than 80 percent of citizens. Some concrete results have been achieved in this process. I am convinced that, beside the European path, there is no other realistic path that would lead BiH forward. I can understand, to a certain extent, appeals to the international community to use its authority in order to «impose order» in the country first and then start the process of European integration, but such appeals are unrealistic. The fastest way for BiH to become a «normal» country is through European integration, not before that. That process is integrative by its nature, so the country will be integrated in a much easier way. It was the case with other countries that are now successful EU members and I see no reason why BiH should fail to be equally successful on this path. But BiH has proven unsuccessful so far.

You want me to remove them, but you vote for them

Miroslav Lajčák: Very often, people ask me to remove this or that politician, impose this or that law, yet these same politicians regularly win support in elections and continue sitting in institutions and receiving high salaries. Let me explain first, if the situation is not radically changed after 300 removals and about 900 HR Decisions, then it must be clear that BiH cannot progress by means of sanctions of the International Community. In all democratic countries, it is

citizens who penalize those who do not work in their interest.

Therefore, I expect citizens and the media to pay more attention than before to the work – and lack of work – of the state and Entity parliaments, government and other institutions and use legitimate means, familiar in the democratic world, to bring them to their senses, because the last year was very disappointing. As far as we are concerned, I and my Office together with other parts of the International Community will exert constant pressure; we will react adequately and we will not allow the country to end up on a precipice. We all know very well the boundaries that we must not cross.

You elect incompetent and selfish politicians

Miroslav Lajčák: Fourteen years after the war you are electing unprepared, incompetent and selfish politicians who are not able to sit down and reach agreement in the interest of the state and their respective institutions, and who are also unable to fulfill the bare minimum of citizens' needs. In other words they are not able to agree in a manner that would be acceptable to all and secure progress. You are just waiting for the High Representative to wave his magic wand and resolve issues to the benefit of one or other group.

Truth is not always flattering. We all want to hear nice things about ourselves. However, we do not have the right to reject the truth, or some of its parts, just because it is not flattering enough. We should not blame the mirror for the ugly image it reflects. Because if everybody does that (and unfortunately it is typical here in BiH), if everybody convinces himself that he is the good guy and everybody else is bad, there is no chance of reaching agreement in such an environment. No agreement means no progress for BiH – warns the high representative.

Do you follow the situation with the gas supply to BiH. Is this not another example of a lack of care for the citizens for the sake of high politics?

Miroslav Lajčák: Of course I do and I feel the consequences, because I also have gas heating, although I have an alternative. You are right, because, just as in many other issues, BiH is here also at the end of events and reacts late or not at all. Even when it does react, the reactions come late and are not systematic, they are weak. I can tell you that the way in which Serbia came forward to help Bosnia and Herzegovina and citizens of Sarajevo is an excellent example of regional cooperation. This crisis can also be a good indicator of the power of the EU. BiH, as an individual country, can hardly manage these sorts of situation alone, but it is clear that when you negotiate as a member of the European Union together with more than 500 million citizens, then you are much stronger and more protected in these situations.