

Interview: MIROSLAV LAJČÁK, HIGH REPRESENTATIVE: DODIK'S REMOVAL WOULD JEOPARDISE THE EXISTENCE OF BiH

"Looking back over my mandate to date, I have a problem to accepting and fully understanding the enormous power of the forces within Bosnia and Herzegovina that do not want the country to move forward"

Interviewed by: Svjetlana Salom

In an interview for *Global*, the High Representative Miroslav Lajčák, who was recently appointed the head of Slovakian diplomacy, explains why he is leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina.

He admits that the political atmosphere in BiH has not improved during his mandate, and believes that the international community now must define its stance with regard to the situation in the country.

His message to everyone in BiH is to give a chance to the Prud agreement, concluding that the orchestrated attack against the fact that the three leaders got together to talk about the country's progress is puzzling.

Global: At the start of your mandate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, you stated for Sarajevo press that you would focus on intensifying communication with local politicians, and that you would use the far-reaching Bonn powers. As a priority, you indicated the establishment of normal political atmosphere that has not existed in BiH for years. What do you make of that statement today, given the fact that your priority – a normal political atmosphere – is something you

failed to establish?

LAJČÁK: I would not change a single word, because this remains my firm conviction to date. Firstly, to establish a normal political atmosphere, normal communication in which disagreements exists, but so do talks and efforts to reach a compromise. My second objective was to make the European theme the top priority, and what I said for the Bonn powers is that they represent my yellow and red cards, just like a football referee, and that I intend to use them in that manner. I would not change anything in this way of thinking.

Global: All right, do you feel disappointed that you failed in achieving these objectives?

LAJČÁK: I came to Bosnia and Herzegovina conveying at the same time the dominant impression of the international community, which then truly believed that BiH is well on the way towards EU integration, and that transition would be the main subject of my mandate. That was the reason I accepted the job in the first place. Coming from a new EU member country, I wanted to bring the EU closer to BiH citizens, to demonstrate that it is not a fiction, and that I would be able to use here the experience I have.

Yes, that did not happen. The political atmosphere did not improve. The international community now must define its stance towards this situation. It is clear we cannot continue like this. Today we treat Bosnia and Herzegovina in two ways, which are mutually exclusive.

In the first case, BiH is a protectorate that must have an international protector, and in the second the country aspires to join the EU, and it is a country with complicated structure, but in qualitative terms it is no different from other countries in the region. This conflict between two varying concepts is something that created problems for me during my entire mandate.

Global: In what sense?

LAJČÁK: If BiH is ready to conduct its own affairs, if it has institutions with democratic legitimacy, and the necessary capacity, then the protectorate is not required here at all. If, however, there is a need for a protectorate, then let us not play lip service to the EU story, about us having genuine partners here and us not wanting to get involved. It is either one or the other. Otherwise the result is a truly ridiculous situation where domestic politicians are saying on the one hand; “we need you, because we cannot function without you”, while on the other they say: “give us candidate status, because we are mature enough to communicate with 27 EU members”. Therefore, the message is this: we cannot come to an agreement between ourselves, but we will certainly come to an agreement with all of you. That is an absurdity.

One other thing: When I look back on my mandate up until now, I have a problem accepting and fully understanding the enormous power of those forces within the country that do not want this country to move forward. Every time something good is done for BiH, like for example the signing of the SAA, there is so much criticism, false of course, of the EU. When political leaders started meeting regularly, for the first time since the elections, in order to discuss solutions, and when all saw this approach could yield results, what followed was an enormous negative campaign that followed, ridicule, and attempts to treat it all with irony.

Global: Whose criticism are you referring to? That of politicians, or analysts?

LAJČÁK: Quasi-politicians, quasi-analysts and quasi-media. No one offered any alternative whatsoever. However, the tremendous power of those forces that do not want Bosniak, Serb and Croat politicians meeting regularly and seeking solutions is very evident.

Global: And who are they?

LAJČÁK: Well, you know that very well. Who were those witty people who talked about Snow White and the Six Dwarfs, how very funny, and I would ask that “critic” in turn: what do you offer? Then, there were some quasi-analytical comments in some daily newspapers. It is as if some people fear that the success of BiH, if they have not participated in it directly, is worse than the joint failure of all. I was truly surprised by the animosity directed at progress demonstrated in some circles.

Global: When you look back at your mandate at the helm of OHR, is there anything you regret, anything you would have done differently?

LAJČÁK: You know the saying: After war, all are generals. I am not a part of that story, I never think about what could have been. I made my decisions relying on information I had at that particular moment, and in that sense I have nothing to regret.

Global: Still, could you please try to put yourself in the position of your critics, and tell us, self-critically, was absolutely everything done correctly?

LAJČÁK: When I look at results, especially from the second half of last year, then there is nothing good there. On the other hand, I know I fought and worked hard, both in the country and as an advocate of BiH abroad, to help the international community define its stance towards BiH, help the domestic institutions realise that the European road is the only possible way ahead. True, the results do not reflect this. I am not aware of any mistakes, and I am a self-critical person. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight one might say this should have been done like this, but at the time, I could not have decided otherwise.

It is difficult for me to answer your question because of where we are now, the challenges that lie ahead and what we

need to do.

Global: You do not analyse the past, something that is done a lot in BiH?

LAJČÁK: Sometimes even too much.

Global: To come back to the present though; you commended the Prud agreement. Are you confused by contradictory statements from the three leaders after the last meeting in Banja Luka?

LAJČÁK: To a certain extent, yes. But I am far more confused by the repeated orchestrated attacks against the fact that they sat together and that the country reached that level of agreement. We could immediately hear a barrage of insults, how they are traitors, for meeting to discuss issues, and then the ridiculing all over again. The media focused on the issue that is most difficult to interpret, and they ignore the part that is not at all problematic in terms of interpretation. I find this much more confusing. The question is in whose interest this is. In whose interest it is to convey the following message: "Do not talk with politicians from other constituent peoples, we will not forgive you for that." And I ask: where does that message and that policy lead this country?

Global: Did it not occur to you that the issue here is public distrust toward politicians who are tailoring the future structure of BiH?

LAJČÁK: Give them a chance! Wherever I go in BiH, citizens complain about their politicians. But they have democratic credibility; they were elected in democratic elections, and acknowledged by the EU and all international organisations. How then can citizens ask me not to acknowledge them as partners? This brings us again to a direct conflict between these two concepts: European partnership and a protectorate. I am clearly in favour of the European partnership concept, along with the use of powers I have at my disposal, but not with a view to resolve problems that should clearly be

addressed elsewhere in BiH, i.e. to those who are competent to resolve them.

Global: The Bonn powers gave you a possibility to remove any local official, including directly elected politicians for whom OHR believes they are obstructing the peace process. The public repeatedly called on you, for failure to use these powers in relation to statements made by Milorad Dodik.

LAJČÁK: That is so superficial... Does anyone serious really believe that Dodik's removal would resolve the problems in BiH? Here is my answer: at this moment, it would create so many problems that the very existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina would be jeopardised! And I do not care if someone might like this or not. All those who criticise me for not using the Bonn powers actually think like this: you should use the Bonn powers but only the way I see fit, and not as you think you should. Can you change the way people think through the Bonn powers?!

Today we are witness to inflammatory rhetoric, poisoning the political atmosphere, intimidation – but had there been any concrete action that jeopardises the integrity of the state, I would not have hesitated a second. But for someone to ask me to use the Bonn powers because some politician sent a letter to another politician expressing his support, and you simply do not like that fact, so you call on the High Representative to remove him – that is idiotic, and I am not an idiot.

I want to be absolutely clear. If you do not want to talk to each other, your appeals to the High Representative to impose that are futile. He can only do that so that it benefits one side, while it does not benefit the other two, and that would create even greater tension. To political statements and rhetoric, I react with political means, to action I would react with action. And the fact that Dodik sent a letter to Israel, I do not think he violated the Dayton Agreement by it. And unlike Zlatko Lagumdžija, I absolutely do not think that I

should remove Dodik because of the letter.

For, unlike him, I think about what it would mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

GLOBAL: When you're mentioning actions to which you would react, compared to statements, you recently said that you would not allow a referendum on secession for that would overstep the "red line" set by the international community. Don't you think that this line has been set way too high? Don't the EU and the international community in BiH have a role stronger than that to react only in the event of drastic situations that would be an introduction to a new conflict? Pretty pessimistic message...

LAJČÁK: That "red line" primarily has to be defined by the international community, and not some politicians in BiH, who do that just to promote themselves.

GLOBAL: No, you said that, you defined it.

LAJČÁK: Yes, yes, yes, at the moment when I arrived here the international community was convinced that we could raise the bar; that this country was already going towards EU transition, so that the international presence should go towards transition. Unfortunately, my three-year presence shows that almost nothing has come out of transition, that the atmosphere is not improving. I wonder if it is good for BiH were the international community now to say; "our hope and belief that you have mature were premature, here we come again to run your country by a remote control through the High Representative, forget about the European perspective". Would such a message be met with applause here? I came here to use powers to prevent wrong turns, not to drive the country forward through my powers.

GLOBAL: Explain then what is in your view a negative deviation to which you would react?

LAJČÁK: Threats to the state integrity, state institutions, destroying the reforms achieved. Let me reiterate, people cannot be forced through the Bonn powers to respect one another, to sit down and reach agreements. This can be achieved only with a positive attitude towards something that everybody believes in, and 80 percent of citizens of this country believe in the European perspective...

GLOBAL: The assessment is problematic, in order of priorities, for BiH citizens internal instability is at present the more important, more existential topic than the EU perspective, which is on the back burner in their minds.

LAJČÁK: I am speaking about a process. You have to have something towards which you are going. If you open newspapers in the morning to see who else has been removed by the High Representative, will it improve the atmosphere? In the Federation they ask me why I don't use the Bonn powers to remove this or that person, and in Republika Srpska why I am still here. Everybody wants only his or her voice to be heard, that's the problem. Look at what the international community is dealing with today: financial crisis, Gaza, Afghanistan, then we had the energy crisis...for someone from BiH to now say; "You, the international community, should be dealing with us seriously!" And why? "Because we do not want to reach agreement!" They even say that the situation is difficult, but you have the institutions, but these are just blocked, for you are not reaching any agreements. Those who, notwithstanding, do that, have become a target of hatred. Do we re-install 60,000 NATO soldiers? Open up OHR offices throughout the country? Should I take politicians into custody and use firearms to force them to reach agreement?!

GLOBAL: Well, not in such a dramatic way, but the public did expect a more determined action.

LAJČÁK: I came with the conviction that BiH had the potential to go towards the EU and that was my mandate. For the mandate

of a protector, who does not want to respect election results, and for the mandate of a protector who ignores politicians that you have legitimately elected – I am obviously a wrong person. So my going away should bring a lot of satisfaction to all those who do not want to be treated as partners, but rather as servants. However, I personally hope that this will not happen.

GLOBAL: Is the agreement on four regions good for the future of BiH?

LAJČÁK: I have no comment on that. There is nothing to comment on. There is so much that is yet to be defined at the moment. I read the Prud agreement, at this stage, in another way; agreement on the budget was reached and adopted in the Parliament; the Brčko agreement interpretation came about on the third attempt, and is very close to being adopted; the decision on state property is coming, although very slowly; in a way, a step forward has been made in a certain way on the census; and for the first time the issue of constitutional reforms has been opened up.

The first interpretation is always broad, then we get a bit closer. Instead of criticizing what has been least defined, I am looking at what we have defined most closely. If someone thinks that you can define the constitutional structure of BiH after one meeting, then this person is not serious.

GLOBAL: Readers will be interested in your assessment which, with the authority of the High Representative, you will make on politicians with whom you have had the best cooperation?

LAJČÁK: From the ranks of the Serbs, I've had the most serious communication with the chair of the BiH Presidency Nebojša Radmanović. From the ranks of the Croats, with Dragan Čović. As far as the Bosniaks are concerned, both Sulejman Tihić and Haris Silajdžić are men that I respect, though they are different and the way to communicate with them is totally

different, but both of them deserve the respect of the international community [sic].

GLOBAL: You have assessed politicians as based on their ethnic community. Does this mean that the agreement of the leaders of national parties, generally speaking, this kind of political platform, is BiH's future?

LAJČÁK: National parties are not at issue, the issue is the manner in which politics is conducted. The SNSD and SDP are members of the family of social-democratic parties, the SDA, HDZ and PDP are members of people's parties group, these are classic parties that fall into European models, and this is good. The problem is that these parties have also been pushed into ethnic politics by the atmosphere in the country and constitutional structure.

The unfortunate fact is that this brings results. People are still reacting to manipulation by fear and this will continue until the realisation comes that for 14 years this has had them going in circles. Look where the others in the region stand, and where BiH stands. That is why I initiated the European campaign in which I visited 17 towns across BiH – so that citizens would understand, through direct talks, that their role is much stronger than they think.

However, this cannot happen overnight. BiH is special given the fact that the role I became engaged in early last year is normally played by civic society, non-governmental organizations, independent free media, leaders and intellectuals who influence the public opinion. Everything is divided here, so these segments and their ability to exert influence on citizens, on constituencies beyond an ethnic group – are very limited. The responsibility of the international community and the EU is to help create among citizens an understanding of the principle: it's my decision, but my responsibility too.

GLOBAL: Upon offer by Slovakia, you first said that you were not available, given the mandate in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then afterwards, upon personal invitation of the Prime Minister Robert Fico, you accepted the invitation for the chief of diplomacy. What really made you change your original decision?

LAJČÁK: At the end of last year I had already concluded that [March's] PIC meeting was a kind of culmination of my mission here. Let me explain why. I expect the international community to take a decision on it's direction: if it goes towards transition, and OHR's closure, then all that is left to do after March is a technical job of closing down the OHR. OK, they can do that, with me or without me. There are no challenges of political nature in this, and my intention was not to remain as the European Union representative. If the PIC decides that there is no closure, then we go on, which logically means the strengthening of the OHR. I replied earlier to that point; that means that European issues will be put on the backburner and then I cannot see myself here.

GLOBAL: So, you no longer saw yourself here in any of the variants?

LAJČÁK: I see myself in helping the completion of the transition process and the European issue becoming issue number one for this country.

GLOBAL: But, it hasn't become that, hasn't it?

LAJČÁK: Yes. That is exactly what I am saying. We are approaching a decision in March, so the offer from my prime minister came two months early. I accepted it on condition that I continue to bear responsibility until they find replacement for me here. My responsibility is to make sure that PIC can decide on a way forward based on information obtained from my institutions and myself.

GLOBAL: What is the truth with regard speculations over

dissatisfaction with your work in international circles?

LAJČÁK: I have not heard that there was any dissatisfaction. In that event I doubt I would be the chief of diplomacy of Slovakia. I think that I am the first High Representative who is going to such high office after BiH. The political atmosphere in BiH is very strange, political leaders are really masters in wasting time, opportunities and friends. It is as if they all want those people who came with the best of intentions to fail, as if they all enjoy in making them look cheap. People here have absolutely not understood that the chief of diplomacy of an EU and NATO member state is in fact a member of a prominent club that will be making decisions directly connected to your future and that within that club there are only two-three individuals who have personal, direct experience of the region and your country.

GLOBAL: What recommendations will you give to PIC?

LAJČÁK: I am not in a position to say now what my recommendation is, I can only say what I do not want and that is for the status quo to continue.

GLOBAL: What successor do you expect?

LAJČÁK: My successor has to be both the High Representative and the Special Representative. If he is the High Representative, he should have powers with the support to use them. I think that dreaming about a strong political figure is lying to oneself. The key thing for this person is to understand this region and this country and to have a clear mandate from the international community.

GLOBAL: You recently spoke with the Chair of the Council of Ministers Nikola Špirić about priorities of EU integration that have to become topical again. What do you think about Mr. Špirić's work and how do you explain the fact that following the six-month period in which the Directorate for European Integration was without a director Mr. Špirić has appointed

himself as acting director of this Directorate, the most important link between BiH and the EU institutions?

LAJČÁK: And how do you explain that this, it seems, worries the EU only?! In six months I have not seen a single BiH politicians who perceives this as a problem, that BiH, among other things, does not have an ambassador to Brussels as well. This is a reflection of a political culture in which everybody has their own side of the story and does not listen to others. We also do not have other important directors; Civil Service Agency, Communications Regulatory Agency, police agency etc. Why are the High Representative, the head of the European Commission Delegation, the US ambassador and other ambassadors talking about that, why aren't local politicians talking about that?