

Interview: Miroslav Lajčák, High Representative / EU Special Representative in BiH: “Competition between the Entities and neglecting the State will not get you far”



Sarajevo-x.com: Mr. Lajčák, beside BH visitors of this site, a number of people from around the world including BH diaspora, will be reading this interview, your words, messages... If you were to describe BiH today from your point of view and to comment on the developments here, what would you say?

Miroslav Lajčák: The most important thing at this point is that Bosnia and Herzegovina is ever closer to signing the SAA with the EU. That is a historical step for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, that is the first agreement between BiH and the EU. It also represents a new level of cooperation and creates the pathway to potential membership in the European Union. Every country that took that path achieved progress and prosperity.

I am confident that results will be the same for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Depending on your elected representatives/politicians the progress can either be fast or more time will be wasted. Time is a luxury that political

elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot afford, because the citizens can no longer wait for their lives and lives of their children to pass by while they are conducting ephemeral discussions often unrelated to the European integrations or better standards for the citizens.

The ultimate paradox is the fact that EU has been waiting for three years for politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina to reach an agreement on the police reform and now all we hear from these politicians are endless laments about delaying the SAA signing for couple of weeks because it needs to be translated into 22 EU languages and three languages in official use in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I can only hope that they will be equally eager to implement this Agreement.

In fact, the time wasted is only a portion of the problem of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. I still have not heard any of the politicians saying what is the plan to follow the signing of the SAA. What should be done so we are better prepared for the next stage of integrations? I did not notice this type of discussion and that discussion is what we need the most at this point.

Sarajevo-x.com: Everything happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina can easily be described with a phrase "on-and-off" and then we reach some kind of consensus, than again we have an imaginary conflict in the political arena and then there is an agreement concerning some very important issues within just a day or two. Everything that parties in power do seems to be nothing more than manipulation. What do you think?

Miroslav Lajčák: I agree with you. There is a potential to find a compromise, one minute the compromise is reached but very quickly everything is ruined through media wars and political games. I do understand that some people are intimidated by the EU, because it is well organized system with very little space for manipulations. EU politics is practical and based on agreements and understanding.

I can understand that EU, being like this, intimidates some people, because they do not know how to deal with projects, to create new values or prosperity. What they know is to play with the emotions and fears. Something like that exists in European politics as well, but in much lesser extent, unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina where that is all the politics is about. It is easier to make people fear from one another and pretend to be protecting them, than to deal with the economy and specific questions that are crucial. It may be easier for the politicians, but it is by no means easier for the people.

Sarajevo-x.com: Recent consensuses, in particular the one about amendments in the Election Law concerning Srebrenica, imply that the real consensus is possible and not only that, it is possible to reach it fairly quickly. In your opinion, what seems to be the biggest problem in this initial stage of this country's accession to Europe and its progress?

Miroslav Lajčák: The main obstacle is that the politicians do not feel the pressure from the citizens and the NGO sector. I strongly believe that the only way to fix this, and any other politics anywhere in the world, is the presence of the pressure from the citizens. Politicians have to feel responsible and accountable. They should ask themselves whether or not they have kept their promises and if that will suffice for the citizens to elect them for another mandate. Until we have that, as long as the politicians, due to the lack of public involvement, see the citizens merely as a voting instrument, instead of seeing them as a corrective it will not get much better.

Imposed arrangements and decisions of the High Representative or anyone else cannot substitute for this effort of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NGO sector. This is the process that has to be authentic in its entirety, if we want it to be successful. We can help, but anything more than that is detrimental for the very idea that the local politicians need to be aware that they have responsibilities

towards their citizens.

Sarajevo-x.com: Why aren't you more assertive when it comes to actions? You sometimes react, but very quietly, subtly and the public gets the impression that it does not matter what you do, your decisions and moves do not matter, it is Milorad Dodik who has a final say. You have heard already that people refer to him as your boss?

Miroslav Lajčák: I have heard all kinds of nonsense. However, it is absurd that someone would like me to become a part of the media war and political games on daily basis, by getting involved with reactions, verbally or through imposing decisions every time someone makes a statement. There is no such thing as an opinion that will not be judged by one side and praised by another. I am not interested in that. I am interested in the welfare of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its progress towards the EU. We do pay attention to different statements that people make, but we are more attentive to what specific actions are taken against Bosnia and Herzegovina. You may be confident that I and the entire International Community would strongly react against any incident if it was anything more than the daily political rhetoric. I am not the right person to address this question. This question is intended for the local political leaders who should respond in terms of what they think they will achieve with the politics of irresponsible, ungrounded and, very often, even absurd statements, which are inapplicable. But it serves the purpose of making people fight and poisoning the atmosphere in the social landscape of BiH. No Bonn Powers are powerful enough to change politicians' habits and citizens' opinions. If they were, all these problems would already be resolved, because Bonn Powers have been used more than 850 times. Bonn Powers are available, they have a specific role and I will not hesitate to use them if BiH is at risk. I do not see this everyday political rhetoric as a threat. I am concerned about actions. The society is in the process of maturing. This

process has to be supported, by raising public awareness and not by using Bonn Powers gullibly thinking that people will forget about what they believe in.

Sarajevo-x.com: Is Milorad Dodik part of the problem in BiH?

Miroslav Lajčák: That depends, sometimes. Sometimes he is part of the problem and sometimes he is part of the solution. But this is not the rule that applies only to him. This often applies to a number of politicians.

There were some ceremonious announcements of the OHR Anti-Corruption Team. The other day it was published that the Team is working "full steam ahead" and that some public figures are under investigation. What are your expectations from this team? Do you expect some results or this is just another tool for political persuasion of infuriated political powers?

Miroslav Lajčák: I will take this opportunity and say that there were ceremonious announcements, again in everyday political speeches. What I did form is a small analytical team, which will not initiate and conduct investigations. It is their job to analyze the data collected and forward it to the local judicial institutions for evaluations and further actions. To remove any possible confusion, OHR team will not do the job of national judiciary and it will not be used to blackmail the politicians. In order to protect the team, we do not disclose the details of their work.

Sarajevo-x.com: Mr. Lajčák, which part of Bosnia and Herzegovina is better, is it RS or FBiH? Or maybe neither of the two?

Miroslav Lajčák: If there were a healthy competition, the citizens would surely feel the benefits. Sometimes it seems as a competition of who gets to be worse.

Sarajevo-x.com: Have the people and the media deal with the discussion "who is better", and as if it was not important

that neither part and the entire BiH, is moving forward. Nobody is thinking about that aspect.

Miroslav Lajčák: I am interested in BiH as a country that functions as a single economic space. If we see things from this prospective, it will get better for entities as well as other levels of authority in BiH. That would be European way to solve the problems. This reverse process, a competition between entities and neglecting the State, will not get you far.

I would like to know why you do not react when it comes to the anti-Dayton statements? For example, since Dodik is a celebrity, especially in RS, he issues a dozen press releases a day, let us go back to his statement that Sarajevo is not a capital, but only a seat of so called Common Institutions. It seems to me that you have not said anything about that, although Dayton is clear on that issue.

I believe that I have already answered this question, but I will reiterate that the entire International Community is keeping an eye on the situation and will strongly react against any incident if it represents anything more than the empty political rhetoric. In all honesty, such statements come from all parts of BiH. There is no decision of the High Representative that would be able to change habits of politicians and people's opinions. I do not wish to become a part of the collective paranoia and everyday political wars fought through the media. The one who thinks that I will worry about the ungrounded quasi criticism is terribly wrong. I will not take that train without the timetable, the train called everyday politics. It would be much easier on me to play that game, but I cannot afford that luxury because it would be very irresponsible towards the country and I do not want that.

Sarajevo-x.com: You are engaged in an interesting project – series of public debates about European perspective of BiH involving citizens. Can you tell us what are the impressions

that you carry from these debates?

Miroslav Lajčák: More details about the campaign can be found on www.reci.ba. My impressions are, in a nutshell, pretty much what we expected and also contrary to the politics demonstrated in BiH. People want to know when they will be able to travel without visas, when they will start living better, they want to know about the future for their children.... All of this is related to very specific questions, i.e everyday life. In my contacts with the citizens I noticed very little of the unrealistic politics. Sometimes I wish that political leaders are with me at the debates so they can hear what citizens see as problems and see the discrepancy between what politics sets out as "important issue" and what citizens believe are the important issues.

Sarajevo-x.com: My last question is relevant for us, the members of the media. OSCE and American Government are concerned about the freedom of the press. I will remind you of frequent assaults against the journalists, attempts to establish political control over the CRA, jeopardizing the independence of the public broadcasting system.

Miroslav Lajčák: First of all, I need to emphasize that I execrate any attack against the journalists in BiH. There is no justification for that and I expect that the police and prosecution authorities will react in such cases. On the other side, in order not to give excuses to those attacking them, the journalists should respect their code of ethics and rules. In the last Declaration, the PIC stressed the importance of freedom of expression, implying free and independent media, as a condition to secure the highest level of human rights and fundamental freedoms.