Lajčák: Without police reform, the door to the EU will be closed

Lidove noviny: Even more than a decade after the Balkan conflict ended, Bosnia and Herzegovina is still grappling with a number of problems. Which is the biggest one?

Lajčák: The most fundamental problem from my point of view is that the country has no set strategic direction. Simply speaking, it has no target and it is therefore impossible to assess whether it is proceeding quickly or slowly and whether it is heading in the right direction in the first place. Bosnia needs to become part of the European integration process and settle the question of its setup, that is, adopt a new constitution. It is still governed by the Dayton constitution, which was adopted in 1995 as an annex to the Dayton Peace Agreement. The main task at that time was to stop the war, which has meanwhile been accomplished. When a country with a population of under four million has nine presidents and vice presidents, 14 governments and parliaments, and 144 ministers, no one can criticize us when we consider this inefficient.

Lidove noviny: Why is the police reform mentioned most frequently when there is talk about reforms that need to be implemented in the country?

Lajčák: This is a reform that has been discussed since 2004. Bosnia and Herzegovina began the technical part of talks on a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU that year and completed them in 2005. Bosnian politicians agreed that the Agreement would only be signed after the approval of the police reform. But the police reform has been at a standstill for several months now…

Lidove noviny: You recently gave local politicians an ultimatum until the end of the month to agree on the reform. Why this deadline?

Lajčák: It is simple. I proceed from the fact that the European Commission will publish its annual appraisal report in November, which, as the situation stands now, is going to be negative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a year Parliament has approved only one piece of legislation related to European integration, which is awfully little.

Lidove noviny: What is the gist of the police reform, in fact?

Lajčák: The reform is based on three European principles. The first principle is

that the police force should be managed at the level of the state because, at present, it is managed at the level of entities. The second principle is that it should be free of political influence and the third principle concerns functionality, that is, police districts must be established on the basis of the criterion of functionality. However, each party perceives these principles differently. The constitution is another task awaiting us. Bosniaks and Serbs differ in their approach to what the future state should look like. The Bosniaks would like to weaken the entities and establish central institutions. The Serbs, on the other hand, have a tendency to have strong entities and to merely delegate powers to the level of the state. And both the Bosniaks and the Serbs look at the police reform in such a way that the principle that will prevail with respect to the police will become a precedent for the future constitution.

Lidove noviny: It seems, for now, that each party is pushing only its own demands. What could make them more accommodating?

Lajčák: An important motivating factor should be the fact that this agreement is the key that will open the door to the process of European integration. However, the integration factor is, for the time being, much weaker here than in Central Europe or in other countries of this region. Naturally, Brussels expects them to act in keeping with the declared priorities and to come to an agreement on the basis of my proposal. But as long as they look at the police reform through symbolism and as a starting point for the future constitution, the chances for an agreement will be declining.

Lidove noviny: Will there be an agreement on the police by the end of the month?

Lajčák: That process is now under way at the level of experts. For the time being, I do not see sufficient political will to bring the process to a successful conclusion. According to local political culture, compromise is not considered a victory but a defeat. But the public expects them to come to an agreement. The outcome of the police reform will determine whether integration or isolation are in store for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Lidove noviny: Are you an optimist?

Lajčák: I keep saying that we have no alternative. There exists no other alternative but the European one. The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not depend on the colour of police uniforms but on whether or not Bosnia will be part of the integration process. This is what I repeat to the politicians here.