

Speech by EU Special Representative and High Representative Miroslav Lajčák at the Conference on BiH European Perspective



BiH Needs Democratic Dialogue on EU Integration

Mr President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have invited you here today because Bosnia and Herzegovina's European future is not just a project between the political elite and European Union. This is an issue that requires involvement and full support from all sectors of the society.

Five years ago, out of all the countries in the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the most prominent candidates for fast integration with Europe. Today, however, the other countries – despite all of their own particular difficulties and challenges – have moved ahead while Bosnia and Herzegovina is moving sporadically and slowly.

The initialling of the SAA last December was an important step in the right direction – but I and other EU representatives had to persuade the political leadership to do what was necessary. In other EU candidate countries the political leadership lobbied the EU – not the opposite way round!

Mass Participation

Unlike other countries that have joined the EU, BiH has until now failed to witness wider participation in the integration process.

Seventy percent of citizens consistently say they want BiH to get into Europe as quickly as possible – but 70 percent of citizens are not actively involved in making that happen.

Until now they have left responsibility for European integration entirely in the hands of the political leadership.

And the results have been modest.

We are here today to discuss what we must do to change this unsatisfactory situation.

This morning's conference launches an initiative that will fan out across the country. In the coming weeks and months, professionals, businesspeople, employers and workers as "social partners" consumers, students and activists will be invited to take part in debates being organised in 16 towns and cities across Bosnia and Herzegovina. They will be co-organized by local NGOs and take place between 21st February and early May of this year.

This is a consultative process, not a publicity exercise.

One of the shortcomings of Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration effort so far, I believe, has been a failure to connect integration with practical results – improvements to living standards.

A constructive popular debate on integration must focus on how BiH citizens can start to benefit from this process.

Today I am launching a consultation process throughout the country. I want to hear your views on how the EU membership can:

- Consolidate BiH security and democracy?
- Improve economic climate, stimulating investment and job creation?
- Increase regional development and cooperation?
- Create opportunities for youth and raise education

standards?

Popular Dialogue

We did not invent these themes; they are a result of consultation with groups of citizens throughout BiH. They have told us that these are the areas they are most interested in when it comes to their own future.

This is an *authentic* exercise in popular dialogue. BiH citizens have their own interest and stake in this process, but so far we have not really heard their voice.

Europe is, among other many other things, about inclusion, participation and democratic dialogue. Bosnia and Herzegovina must now increase its efforts to do the same.

So today and for the next two months I am **not** going to lay out what **I** think BiH should do in order to speed up its integration process. I am going to **listen to what you think** BiH should do.

We are not going to produce a blueprint in one conference – but over the weeks and months to come we will establish a process through which the population can stop being silent and begin to speak.

It is time to expand the political discourse in BiH and to encompass new and broader horizons. Our overarching objective is to make this country stable, prosperous, democratic and secure and a member of the EU.

What is surprising is how little alternative is offered. In all countries in central Europe and in the Balkans NGOs had an enormous role in mobilizing the public, in activating a discussion in all segments of the society so that everybody becomes part of the process.

This is a process in which the whole society must take part for it concerns all of you.

This is not a one-off event, but a process that can last until the country joins the EU.

I urge all of you to use this unique opportunity.