

# Speech by High Representative and EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak at the European Fund for the Balkans in Sarajevo



Ladies and Gentleman,

It is my pleasure to address you few days after Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union. Today the country is in a new relationship with the EU and the region. We can now begin to tackle a range of political issues – including the role of regional institutions – in an atmosphere that is optimistic and realistic.

As one of the most complex countries in the region, the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its European path will be a key contribution to the broader political developments in this region.

It is no accident that the South-East European Cooperation Council has its headquarters in Sarajevo – geographically, culturally and politically this country is the centre of the region.

The signing of the SAA and the fact that the EU once again reconfirmed its commitment to the country and the region must

be seen as positive, by the citizens and politicians in the region.

It should also be taken as a positive signal that even at the time when the European Union has to deal with its own future and its own structure; it is fully committed to the future EU membership of the region.

Bosnia and Herzegovina had to deal with painful and unnecessary delays in order to reach this stage. This is because the political leadership was not able or willing to put the European agenda above all other political priorities.

Some might argue that in view of this it is unrealistic to expect the political leaders to show sudden enlightenment when it comes to regional cooperation. The record of the last few years, however, shows that politicians will demonstrate willingness for change if the citizens oblige them to do so.

Until recently in this region – and the same applied in my own part of Europe – important issues were decided by powerbrokers behind closed doors. Vestiges of this political and social culture remain and they continue to generate enormous problems. But a new political reality is emerging – and this will become increasingly apparent in BiH post-SAA. Under the new system, politicians work on behalf of the citizens, not the other way around.

I have seen this phenomenon at first hand in recent months in meetings with citizens all across BiH. I have taken part in open debates in 16 towns and cities across BiH, speaking directly with more than 3000 people and I can tell you the nationalist politics don't come anywhere near the top of the list of popular concerns. People are interested in their future and not the past.

I know; I have spent the last four months constantly talking to the people, both in person and through our website RECI.BA. The site has had more than 16,000 visitors out of which 3000

have expressed opinions, fears and hopes about their countries' progress towards Europe. I would urge anyone who has not already done so to visit [www.reci.ba](http://www.reci.ba) and see what BiH's citizens really think.

In short – they want to live in a normal European country and they want this without further unnecessary delays. This is the common and settled aspiration of the citizens of BiH.

Now, with the signing of the SAA, BiH is firmly back on the regional bandwagon moving towards Europe. This means we now have a realistic opportunity to respond to this aspiration in a positive and practical way.

I believe that a useful theme for discussion today would be to examine ways in which regional institutions can best reflect and support the new tide of popular democracy in South-East Europe.

Thank you.