

# Guardian

## An unhealthy state

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In blaming the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina for reform failures, the international community seeks to exclude its own role from scrutiny.

In an article for the International Herald Tribune last year, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, the fifth high representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, wrote that "it is my task as Bosnia's last high representative to oversee the transition from today's quasi-protectorate to local ownership". Yet in a speech before the UN security council on November 15, his successor, Miroslav Lajčák, stressed that discussion over the closure of the office of the high representative "is a long way off". In a little over 18 months, Bosnia and Herzegovina's position as a quasi-protectorate has been reiterated and reinforced. Justifications for this retreat have been found not in the existence of inter-ethnic tension or security concerns, but through the articulation of a political crisis that supposedly threatens the future existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

During a press conference on October 19, Lajčák announced - without having consulted domestic politicians - measures designed to streamline the functioning of the state institutions by changing the voting procedures used by the parliament and council of ministers.

Coming only a week after the failure of the country's politicians to reach agreement over police reform, this initiative has been widely interpreted as one of reproachment for alleged "obstructionism"; though the steering board of the Peace Implementation Council eagerly stated on October 31 that "the only objective of the measures is to streamline the decision-making process in the council of ministers and the parliament".

A day after the PIC had publicly endorsed Lajčák's actions, though with severe reservations expressed by the Russian delegation as to their timing, the chairman of the council of ministers, Nikola Spiric, resigned with the unequivocal assertion that "Bosnia and Herzegovina is absurd. If the international community always supports the high representative and not the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then it doesn't matter if I am the head of that state, or Bart Simpson".

As the tripartite presidency struggles to find a replacement, the need for new parliamentary elections becomes ever more apparent, providing a further hurdle to Bosnia and Herzegovina's reform process. Members of the main Bosnian Serb party, the Party of Independent Social Democrats, have threatened to resign en masse from their government posts if the high representative's decision is not reconsidered. Throughout the Republika Srpska, some 10,000 Bosnian Serbs took part in protests and over 300,000 have signed a petition against the recent measures, illustrating the strength and depth of public opposition.

Though Lajčák immediately dismissed this resulting political crisis as artificial, the amendments proposed and soon to be imposed go to the heart of two of the most contentious and important debates within Bosnia and Herzegovina - the role of the international community and the protection of group rights as enshrined in the consensual model of decision-making prescribed by Dayton.

By changing the way the ethnically-based quorum is calculated, Lajčák's decision removes the requirement of consensus amongst Bosnia and Herzegovina's three constituent nations - Bosniacs, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs - potentially allowing for one of the constituent nations to be outvoted by the other two. By insisting that he will impose the reforms if they are not adopted by December 1, Lajčák has further stifled the development of representative elected bodies and a democratic culture. Issues of this importance and magnitude need to be dealt with through full and frank discussion amongst Bosnia and Herzegovina's political elites and citizens, not through stated technical-bureaucratic initiatives. As the departed Spiric observed, Bosnia and Herzegovina "is unfortunately not a sovereign state".

In the light of recent failures over police and constitutional reform, this intentional confrontation has been engineered by the high representative's office to bolster its own position vis-à-vis domestic actors and to galvanise international opinion about the necessity of its preservation. This political crisis has been generated not by a conflict between Bosnia and Herzegovina's domestic political actors, but by the actions of the high representative, with damaging implications for social and political cohesion.

Earlier this month, the deputy high representative, Raffi Gregorian, told a joint committee of the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington that if such reforms weren't supported, Bosnia and Herzegovina's "very survival could be determined in the next few months if not the next few weeks". Meanwhile, the commander of Eufor, the EU's peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hans-Jochen Witthauer, reassured nobody by saying that "we can again intervene in case a new war breaks out". There are already signs that these accumulated statements are fuelling inflation, as a sense of instability and crisis breeds panic buying that is driving up the price of staple goods. In a country already beset with high unemployment and weak growth, these latest events will do little to attract foreign investment and encourage trade.

The issue around which substantial disagreement and conjecture have revolved further illustrates the often divisive and unconstructive role of the international community and the ambivalent motivations behind specific reforms. As a recent report by the European Stability Initiative scrupulously argues, police reform - over which progress towards signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU has stumbled - is motivated not by internal security concerns, progress on which has been a major achievement of the post-war period, but by political considerations - namely, the internal structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the existence of a plethora of policing models throughout Europe, such as those in Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, the strict and inflexible requirement that Bosnia and Herzegovina introduce a centralised police structure abuses and undermines the potential of EU conditionality.

That this political crisis is attributable to decisions taken by the international community highlights the paradoxical position it occupies. The international community has a

pivotal role to play in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but articulating political crises as a means through which to recover lost credibility and legitimacy undermines its capacity to act as a reform mediator.

Confrontational politics of this sort does little to generate a political climate in which consensus and compromise can be achieved. Instead, such destabilisation affects those who must contend daily with the rising cost of living and a ever gloomier economic outlook. Former high representative Lord Ashdown once remarked that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina "have to decide who to vote for in the elections. This country has to mature." In regularly pinning blame on the people and their politicians for reform failures, the international community has sought to exclude itself from scrutiny and responsibility. As such, the irony of Lajčák's words is not lost when he says that "it is clear to everyone that Bosnia and Herzegovina doesn't function as a healthy and normal state".