

Address by Mr. Reuf Bajrovic to the Balkans Group at the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) on Wednesday 9 September 2009: the topic of the meeting was “*How to Achieve Peace and Stability in the Western Balkans — A Bosnian Perspective*”.

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Balkans Group —

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you today some of the challenges to the EU foreign policy and would like to thank you for your continued interest in the Western Balkans. Following the wars and genocide of the 1990s, the EU has heavily invested in reconstruction and development of this region and its citizens greatly appreciate this.

Since then, countries in the Western Balkans have come a long way in building peace and stability. Croatia and Macedonia have acquired EU candidate status, while other countries all have signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA).

However, despite the progress made in the last decade, major challenges remain on the path of securing lasting peace and stability. Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country I come from, is presently suffering from the deepest political crisis since the end of the war in 1995. Sitting in the heart of the region, Bosnia has historically been the most important piece in the regional stability. Indeed, as it was pointed out in a New York Times article this weekend, any instability in Bosnia tends to spill over to the rest of the region.

The Dayton Peace Accords have stopped the war but also created a complicated state structure which not only institutionalizes ethnic divisions but also creates ample opportunity for abuse by the ruling nationalist parties. The entity voting mechanism, which often translates into ethnic voting, is not just conflict by other means but prevents Bosnia from moving forward on a number of key reforms necessary for its Euro-Atlantic integrations.

The current five party coalition in BiH has ruled since 2006 on a very divisive nationalist platform. The political rhetoric has become extremely nationalist, and in some cases, openly fascist. Major reforms required by the EU, including the police reform, have rarely been implemented due to the inability and unwillingness of the coalition partners to agree on anything. The only point of agreement is corruption and irresponsibility.

Despite this, the international community in general, and the European Union in particular, have decided to let Bosnia sort itself out. The signing of the SAA was conditioned on passing a set of laws that would amount to a meaningful police reform. However, it was quickly apparent that the government would not pass the necessary laws. Facing a serious stability crisis at the time, the EU nevertheless decided to relax the conditions and sign the SAA with Bosnia in June 2008 without the requirements met. This sent a very dangerous message to the Bosnian politicians: if they wait long enough, the EU would eventually relax the conditions to fit their needs and award their irresponsibility.

Yet, after relaxing the conditions on police reform and "rewarding" the government with the SAA, the EU has decided to uphold its conditions in the case of the visa liberalization for Bosnia.

Without any difficulty, the government-friendly media managed to create a perception that the decision was a punishment for the citizens of Bosnia, especially the Bosnian muslims, and EU's message about the country's integration prospects.

Indeed, if this decision were made outside of the regional context, it would have indicated an improvement in using conditionality to encourage reforms. However, other governments in the region have also failed to meet all the necessary conditions yet were awarded conditional visa liberalization starting next year.

By doing this, the EU undermined its credibility with the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and only helped the nationalist forces ruling the country in convincing the citizens that the blame is somewhere else.

Unfortunately, the EU's policy towards Bosnia seems to be focused solely on fulfilling the conditions necessary to close down the Office of High Representative (OHR) and replace it with the EU Special Representative. On paper, for this to happen, Bosnia would need to fulfill five objectives and two conditions set by the Peace Implementation Council (PIC).

The EU seems to be eager to complete the transition process by the end of the year, allowing it to assume full responsibility for the situation in Bosnia. But, in reality, the "5+2" cannot be met by the end of 2009, and the OHR will have to remain in Bosnia for another year. Recognizing this, yet eager to complete the transition, some voices in the EU are nevertheless calling for closure of OHR without the fulfillment of the required conditions. They portray the OHR as the sole problem of the country, the key obstacle on its path to the EU, which unfortunately is not the case. Moreover, it is a very dangerous proposition.

Bosnia has a deep structural problem and, in my view, the OHR has to remain until the country is made fully functional. The present conundrum is one brokered by the International Community and some of the responsibility for its failures rests on those who devised it.

The key to achieving lasting stability in the region is to secure a functional Bosnian state. This can only be done through a meaningful constitutional reform, which would replace the current system of obstructions. However, constitutional reform can not be left solely to the present ruling elite which will not only fail to reach an agreement, as they have in 2006, but will also likely try to use the issue to further arouse fear among the citizens. The last attempt at reform in 2006 failed just before an election and provided the context for victory of the present ruling nationalist coalition and the current crisis in Bosnia.

Mr. Chairman, creating lasting peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not just EU's moral obligation and part of its lasting legacy, but could also be viewed as the first major test of the EU's common foreign policy.

And right now, we are facing a window of opportunity to lay solid groundwork for achieving success by creating a functional Bosnia, and consequently closing down OHR.

Therefore, I would like to offer a few recommendations for immediate consideration by the EU and national policy-makers, including the members of this group.

1. The EU should insist on fulfillment of the "5+2" before closing down the OHR. The "5+2" is unlikely to be met before the end of this year and the EU should think twice before rushing into making a decision that may have serious repercussions on what is left of Bosnia's stability. With all of its shortcomings, the presence of the OHR offers a sense of security to average Bosnian citizens that should not be underestimated. Only when conditions are created in which every citizen can equally participate in and trust the government of Bosnia can the international factor be safely removed.
2. In this context, the EU should help with the constitutional reform by offering meaningful incentives, technical assistance, and broad support. More importantly, it should help to shift the focus away from nationalist agenda by insisting on finishing the constitutional reform by the end of 2009, or leave it for post-election period (year 2011). Constitutional issues should not dominate the 2010 election campaign at the expense of socio-economic issues. This is the only way to strip the nationalist political parties of their power base.
3. In addition to this, the EU should devise policies to boost support for multiethnic political forces ahead of the October 2010 general elections. The EU has already done this in other countries of the region with notable success. In the case of Serbia, for example, it helped the present government defeat the radicals in the May 2008 elections

by offering economic incentives to the pro-European government. We can discuss some ways to do this in the Q&A session.

4. And in the regional context, the EU should help to insulate Bosnia from the negative influence of its neighbours. This is especially true for Serbia which frequently uses its influence with the politicians in the Republika Srpska as a leverage with the international community on the issue of Kosovo. Serbia should be encouraged to follow the example of the neighboring Croatia, which has not only refrained from interfering in Bosnia's internal affairs but has actively discouraged Bosnian Croat politicians from expecting Croatia to take sides on internal issues. Only when they are accountable to their own voters alone will the Bosnian politicians be forced to act in the best interest of their country.