

## LAJCAK RESIGNS: WHAT NEXT FOR BOSNIA?

**Matthew Parish**  
**Oslobodjenje**  
**31 January 2009**

Ever since the departure of Paddy Ashdown in January 2006, Bosnia has not been having much luck with its High Representatives. Christian Schwarz-Schilling came to the country with an explicit mandate to close OHR and transform international intervention in Bosnia from a hard power<sup>1</sup> proconsulship to a soft power<sup>2</sup> EU mission. He set a closure date, of July 2007. Anticipating OHR's departure, Bosnia's political leaders started to reclaim the political dialogue from their international overlords. Political rhetoric became overheated, state politics deadlocked, and the international community got nervous. And so in February 2007, Dr Schwarz-Schilling became the scapegoat and was unceremoniously fired. By July of that year he was gone, the shortest-serving High Representative to date. His replacement would also aim at closure, but the PIC would set strict conditions for that to happen, and there would be no pre-determined exit date until those conditions were fulfilled. This was the task for Miroslav Lajcak, the young new proconsul whose task would be to achieve orderly closure of OHR without backsliding from the state-building work of the Petritsch-Ashdown era.

The problem with this theory was that it was all too late. By appointing a young man from a small country with no significant political support in either Brussels or Washington, DC, the international community was signalling to Bosnia's politicians that it had suffered an irreversible loss of interest in post-war Bosnia. Foreign troops had all but left the country, and the EUFOR presence is too small for anyone to take seriously. Aid money from western governments has also dwindled. Without serious foreign political support, and without credible legal foundation, decisions of the High Representative became just pieces of paper. To his credit, Mr. Lajcak quickly realised this; and after a catastrophic attempt to change the voting rules in the Council of Ministers by international fiat in December 2007, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Nikola Špirić, he effectively stopped using the Bonn Powers. After that, Bosnia's politicians knew that it was just a matter of waiting the High Representative out. The strict conditions would become ever more flexible as time went on, because the international community no longer had an interest in governing Bosnia. OHR became ever more irrelevant, its staff akin to media celebrities, giving interviews and making pronouncements, but with no real power. Sooner or later, OHR was condemned to simply collapse. And thus Bosnia's politicians started preparing for the post-OHR period. They came to realise they could no longer rely on OHR to impose "progress", and therefore they had to work with each other. The first result of this was the Prud Agreement.

Mr. Lajcak, however, was in career trouble. He had lost real power in Bosnia, but like Dr. Schwarz-Schilling he would still be held responsible by the international community as a scapegoat if anything went wrong. This is why it is so difficult to close OHR: nobody wants to

---

<sup>1</sup> Direktno nametanje

<sup>2</sup> Indirektnan uticaj

take responsibility for doing so. So it must have been a gift from the Gods when Mr. Lajcak took the telephone call from Bratislava that would teleport him out of Sarajevo after a mandate lasting barely longer than that of Dr. Schwarz-Schilling. Bosnia is a diplomatic graveyard for foreign officials, and Mr. Lajcak has fortunately escaped that curse. Despite his assurances he will stay engaged in Bosnia until a replacement is found, I doubt we will hear much more from him. I congratulate him on his lucky escape and I wish him all the best.

But the underlying level of international community interest in Bosnia remains extremely low. Brussels sees OHR as an aberration from its democratic ideals and is not likely to invest energy in renewing it. There is no indication that the Obama administration has the slightest interest in post-war Bosnia; Richard Holbrooke is being dispatched to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The idea, expressed over the weekend in some newspapers, that the United States would take over OHR, is quite fanciful: the US Government does not want responsibility for what it sees as a European issue. In these circumstances, the chances that either the EU or the US will send a serious and experienced diplomat to take charge are low. Chris Patten (former British Governor of Hong Kong) and Bertie Ahern (former Irish prime minister), the two heavyweight European politicians being discussed in the Bosnian press, are both far too shrewd to drink from such a poisoned chalice. More likely, the EU will send an even weaker envoy to replace Lajcak. Mr. Lajcak had one advantage: he knew the Balkans well, he understood Bosnia's problems, and he knew his power was weak. It is doubtful his replacement will have this same wisdom. He will likely be fed misconceptions about the strength of his powers by OHR's international bureaucrats, who have an interest in continuing to collect generous salaries for as long as they can.

If the EU sends another weak envoy, there will be a power vacuum, and we can expect the new High Representative's often combative staff to encourage him to reassert the Bonn Powers. But this would be dangerous, because all means of enforcing those powers have evaporated, and Bosnia's politicians know it. Any attempt to impose decisions upon them now will be met with only resistance, hostility and political instability. The achievements of Prud could easily be undermined if a newly aggressive and but fundamentally impotent OHR tries to turn back the clock to the Ashdown era of externally imposed solutions. A High Representative with that mindset would discover only too late what Mr. Lajcak clearly knew: that OHR is now a paper tiger.

A more sensible approach by the EU and Washington would be to take Lajcak's departure as an opportunity to abandon the OHR mandate now. At a recent Washington, DC conference organised by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the criticisms of OHR were deafening, with one speaker after another calling for the organisation's prompt closure. A new EU envoy should take heed of the new intellectual consensus. With Mr. Lajcak safely back in Bratislava, the international community should not try to force his replacement to take responsibility for closing OHR. Instead, the PIC should take advantage of Mr. Lajcak's departure to abandon its prior policy and instead decide to terminate OHR in the shortest possible time scale. This way, the burden of deciding on the organisation's closure will be taken away from the new envoy, who should be given only the EUSR role. The Bonn Powers will therefore be formally abandoned, and the initial progress made at Prud can be built upon. This country's political future can start to be fashioned not by outsiders, but by those who, in a democracy, ought to decide it: the people's democratically elected representatives. The EUSR will then be

freed up to do what an international envoy ought to do: coaxing, but not forcing, Bosnia's people and politicians in the direction of the reforms necessary for EU membership. Unlike the Soviet Union, the EU is a club membership of which is voluntary. Bosnia cannot be forced by High Representative decrees to join. It must take the necessary steps of its own accord.