

Bosnia's Leaders Discover the Joys of Compromise

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The resolution of a major political crisis appears to have given Bosnia and Herzegovina's politics a positive new direction.

The leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina's ruling coalition on Tuesday took another major step away from the recent political crisis and back onto the EU accession path.

At a meeting in Laktasi, near Banja Luka, leaders of the six ruling parties agreed on the appointment of a prime minister; they also agreed to establish a task force that will draft legislation on police reform in the next two months, and, in addition to these practical measures, they agreed that a number of important issues – which have been sidelined by the recent crisis – will now be resolved as quickly as possible.

“This parliamentary majority has demonstrated that it can resolve problems, and we should expect that in the future we will fulfill all the obligations necessary for signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU,” Bozo Ljubic, president of the Bosnian Croat HDZ1990 party, told reporters after the discussions, which he described as “the most successful meeting so far.”

Although analysts have welcomed the series of positive developments in Bosnia over the past two weeks, some stress that progress has been possible mainly because the EU tacitly dropped its earlier requirement for a unified BiH police service.

“The EU seems to have put this issue ad-acta and allowed BiH politicians to postpone a more substantive restructuring of the policing concept so that it is regulated as a part of other constitutional changes,” Gordana Katana, the Banja Luka-based correspondent for the daily newspaper, *Oslobodjenje*, told *Balkan Insight*.

Only a few weeks ago, Bosnia was in the midst of one of the gravest political crises since the end of the war in 1995. Tensions triggered by a renewal of radical rhetoric among some politicians before, during and after the 2006 general elections had reached a climax in the last two months after political leaders failed to reach agreement on police reform. An agreement that met basic requirements laid out by the European Union had been a condition for Bosnia and Herzegovina to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Following this failure, the international community's High Representative and the EU's Special Representative in Bosnia, Miroslav Lajcak, used his executive authority to amend the Rules of Procedure of the BiH government in such a way that cabinet members could no longer bring the machinery of government to a halt simply by not turning up for work. Lajcak called on the BiH parliament to change its own Rules of Procedure in the same way,

saying that if this was not done by December 1 he would make the necessary amendments on his own authority.

Complaining that the new procedures could allow ethnic outvoting, Bosnian Serb representatives threatened to pull out of all state institutions. Prime Minister Nikola Spiric was the first to resign over Lajcak's initiative.

The situation was further complicated by regional tensions over the status of Kosovo, by Russia's newly assertive diplomatic profile in the Western Balkans and by what many regarded as Serbian interference in Bosnian affairs. Some citizens even began to express fears of a new conflict

As the December 1 deadline approached and the international community appeared unable to break the deadlock, many expected the High Representative to amend the parliament's Rules of Procedure on his own, a step that would have further strained relations between Lajcak and Bosnian Serb leaders.

Yet in the space of just a few days the situation changed dramatically.

On November 30, one day short of Lajcak's deadline, a joint parliamentary commission adopted new Rules of Procedure consistent with the terms that Lajcak, with the backing of the international community, has insisted on, and the BiH Parliament immediately did the same. The new rules meet Lajcak's requirement that legislation cannot be blocked when parliamentarians simply choose not to participate in debates, but also incorporate mechanisms that prevent ethnic outvoting, which was the main demand of the Bosnian Serb leaders.

Following this breakthrough, the BiH Council of Ministers – working under a technical mandate – on December 3 adopted an action plan for police reform. This was enough for the EU, which has appeared eager to reward local leaders and reduce tensions. In Sarajevo on December 4, acting Prime Minister Spiric and EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn initialed a Stabilization and Association Agreement in front of party leaders, diplomats and a mass of TV cameras.

Perhaps the most important element in this miraculous turnaround was the fear of a new conflict that had sent tremors through the general public and the political establishment. In light of regional tensions, notably over Kosovo, Bosnian politicians stepped back from the brink.

The two archrivals, Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency and leader of the Party for BiH, SBiH, Haris Silajdzic, and RS Premier and head of the SNSD, Milorad Dodik, substantially modified their positions and toned down their rhetoric.

For its part, the EU seems to have dropped its insistence on a unified BiH police service. The EU's new stance appears to reflect an argument put forward in a recent report by the European Stability Initiative (ESI), a think-tank which specializes in Balkan issues. In its report, the ESI argues that former High Representative Paddy Ashdown and his EU partners mismanaged police reform in Bosnia and increased political tension by insisting on only one out of several possible options for the reorganization of the police service.

The EU appears to have taken advantage of the resolution of the latest political crisis by giving credence to vague but positive statements on police reform which have been made by representatives of the ruling coalition and by modifying its own position. EU policy is now based on allowing Bosnia's leaders to find a common solution for police reform on their own.

Initialing the SAA is essentially symbolic; in order to sign the agreement Bosnia must make concrete progress on a number of issues. Police reform is one of these; others include establishing a viable and European-standard public broadcasting service and restructuring the overall system of government and bureaucracy. Yet local and international officials believe this can be achieved by March or April 2008 – as long as the current spirit of constructive compromise is maintained.

This spirit appeared to be at work on Tuesday in Laktasi, where the six political leaders agreed on the renewal of Prime Minister Nikola Spiric's mandate and that of his entire cabinet.

The leaders also agreed that the new Council of Ministers will within seven days appoint a task force to draft

legislation needed for police reform. This legislation will establish a directorate to coordinate the police forces, a forensic institute, an institution for police education and training, a police support agency and other necessary police structures.

In addition, the leaders agreed that the BiH parliament should move swiftly on other key issues such as adopting a harmonized state budget for 2008, and passing laws on state property and pharmaceuticals, and they agreed on the long-disputed distribution of locations of key state institutes and agencies.

"It is important that we agreed on what has to be done, when and by whom, regarding meeting conditions for signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU," said the leader of the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, SDA, Sulejman Tihic.

"We can send a strong message about the constructive atmosphere we have achieved," said Milorad Dodik.

"If we continue with this dynamic, we could sign the SAA in March or April," added Dragan Covic, president of the HDZ party.

Lajcak, who also participated in Tuesday's meeting, welcomed what he described as a "constructive atmosphere which led to concrete results."

"Several steps were agreed towards the implementation of the declaration on police reform, which brings this country (closer) towards European integration," a visibly pleased Lajcak told reporters.

The next meeting of the six party leaders is scheduled to take place in January.

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