



Republic of Croatia
Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs
Minister

Zagreb, 26 May 2021

Excellency, *dear Josep,*

At the outset, I would like to thank you for organising the debate on *the Western Balkans* at the Foreign Affairs Council on 10 May. I found the *exchange of views* to be very useful, highlighting the importance of this region, which is *at the very doorstep* of the European Union. Croatia remains highly interested to *keep the focus on the region and promote its European integration process*. I therefore welcome your letter to all EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs of 20 May, with a specific reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We all agree that Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a *multi-ethnic state*, is a country with many complex specificities and that the current political situation raises concerns. It is facing significant challenges regarding the rule of law, fight against corruption, weak economy, *unemployment*, illegal migration, and many others. At the same time, *unresolved political issues* are dominating over economic and social issues.

Therefore, resolving the outstanding political issues shall clear the path towards a more sustainable reform agenda and put Bosnia and Herzegovina back on the rails towards the EU. There is no time to waste.

I wish to stress *three major points* in this regard.

First is the significance of the electoral reform through the changes of the Election Law, and limited constitutional changes, which will ensure that all forms of discrimination in the electoral process are removed in a systematic and permanent manner. In doing so, we should never lose sight of the specific historical and political background of the country and its legal tradition. Solutions must come as a result of dialogue and consensus within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

H.E. Mr Josep Borrell Fontelles
HIGH REPRESENTATIVE
VICE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

*It is of utmost importance to simultaneously implement two fundamental principles: **i**) legitimate representation of the three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs), and **ii**) non-discrimination of all citizens in political institutions.*

These two principles are not excluding each other; on the contrary, they are complementary and mutually reinforcing. In a specific and highly sensitive environment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one is unsustainable without the other.

The Sejdīć and Finci Ruling of the European Court of Human Rights calls for the elimination of discrimination in the election process, and not for abandoning the concept of constituent peoples, nor of power-sharing mechanisms of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Any attempt to invalidate these important principles, enshrined in the Constitution through the Dayton-Paris Peace Agreement, threatens the very foundation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Second, we need to act with determination and with a clear focus. I welcome the renewed engagement of the European External Action Service under your leadership in the electoral reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I believe we should give even stronger support to the EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina in facilitating this sensitive issue. Recently, Ambassador Sattler has been under heavy pressure from those who want to obstruct the electoral reform and do not shy away from defamatory language. This is unacceptable and we should send strong and unified message of our support for Ambassador Sattler.

Third, we all agree that 2021 is a year of opportunity, and I must point out that time is of the essence here, since 2022 is a year of next General Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am concerned that if this opportunity is missed, there could be a major political crisis in 2022, that will paralyse political institutions in the country and bring the overall reform process to a halt.

The success will not be possible without political will of the political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their readiness to rise to the occasion.

I would also like to support stronger cooperation with our U.S. partners, as I am confident that our objectives and priorities are the same: a stable and functional Bosnia and Herzegovina that is steadily advancing on its European path. To ensure stronger impact, we should strive to speak with a single voice and send clear messages. This is crucial in terms of our strategic communication.

We should encourage dialogue with and among political leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The dinner you have organised with the six Western Balkans leaders is a good example how to deepen our political dialogue with the region. I propose that we use this informal setting more often and have regular exchange of views on the ministerial level between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In parallel, we should make full use of the existing EU instruments to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina to rebuild its struggling economy. Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance as well as other funds provide an indispensable support in this regard.

Croatia has ensured significant development aid, and supported the cultural, educational, health and other institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Important cross-border infrastructural projects, such as road bridges across the Sava River and the planned gas-pipeline connecting Croatia and southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, are well under way.

We are also actively promoting the cooperation within the framework of Interreg. The budget for Interreg-IPA involving Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro will be increased in the next programming period. Croatian Government adopted the decision to donate 30.000 COVID-19 vaccines to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Excellency, I believe all these efforts demonstrate the unquestionable support of the EU and Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To conclude, I would like to repeat my strong support regarding your initiative. We should continue the EU's proactive approach and intensify our engagement, so that 2021 would become a year in which Bosnia and Herzegovina makes a decisive step forward on its European path.

Yours sincerely,



Gordan Grlić Radman

CC:

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