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Time for a new partnership with Bosnia

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Bosnian politicians want a change to how Bosnian politics is ordered; the departure of Miroslav Lajčák and the arrival of Barack Obama make this a good moment.

As Miroslav Lajčák – the international community's high representative and the European Union's special representative since July 2007 – leaves Bosnia and Herzegovina to become Slovakia's new foreign minister, the time has come for the overdue transition to a more equitable and effective working relationship between Bosnia and the EU.

It comes at a time when three leading Bosnian parties – the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the Party of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – have issued a joint statement calling for a new constitutional and territorial settlement of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Scepticism is due, there is still no consensus on this new proposal in the country, but the international community should take this signal seriously.



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Against this background, our proposal is to seize the opportunity and adopt a wholly new approach by taking partnership and shared responsibility seriously. This is all the more urgent because the world is entering the worst economic crisis since the Second World

War. The momentous changes in Washington, too, signal a new opportunity for getting it right in Bosnia and Herzegovina this time. The fact that the US is considering appointing a special envoy for the Balkans should stimulate the EU to get more involved and effective.

The need for change

Bosnia and Herzegovina's situation is still difficult and will remain so for some time to come. There is no other country in the region whose existence depends so much on the continued integration of Europe. But the unification of Europe is not a one-way street. Europe needs to grow within Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. We have been waiting with rising exasperation for the local authorities to stop their irresponsible infighting and leave maximalist positions behind. Europe would not be where it is today had it not successfully built bridges across historical divides. Bosnia and Herzegovina – and its citizens above all – need to be aware that this is possible in their country as well.

Personally speaking, it is a crying shame how politics is still being conducted in this country, and how conditions set out in the EU's Stabilisation and Association Agreement that would allow the closure of the Office of the High Representative – and thus put an end to dependency and international custodianship – are not being met. This all has become less and less acceptable, even for the strongest supporters of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We sometimes wonder whether day-to-day politics is aware of the increasing difficulties that Bosnia and

Herzegovina's lack of progress is creating for Europe at a time of gigantic economic hardship. While Europe still has to pay too much attention to this region many years after the wars, other – potentially far more dangerous – situations remain unattended to: the fate of the Palestinians in Gaza; the random killings in sub-Saharan Africa; Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran; and challenges of global proportions like climate change and the growing conflict for scarce natural resources, as Europe experienced only recently with regard to Russian gas supplies.

Against this backdrop of mounting global challenges, the urgency of renewed and serious efforts to quickly arrive at a common agenda and create a new partnership between Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina is patently clear.

Framing a partnership

What we suggest is for Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina to embark on a joint search for a decidedly more successful state-building process. What are the essential elements of a viable Bosnia and Herzegovina in an enlarged Europe? It has been stated time and again that the present administrative structures are unsustainable and that the many layers of governance are wasting the money of everyone concerned. Let us thus together change the country's constitutional set-up and get money and resources to where they are urgently needed.

Once agreed on these – extremely well-known – necessary changes, decisions on a realistic timeframe, on a budget, on the monitoring mechanism and possible sanctions could be fixed. After broad consultations with Bosnian stakeholders – government and civil society alike – about the profile of the next international representative, the EU could then decide on the person to lead this effort.

We are convinced that – if taken seriously in both Brussels and Sarajevo – this novel partnership among all parties involved would finally put Bosnia and Herzegovina on the road to local ownership and political responsibility. It would in turn enhance the responsibility and accountability of the international community – especially the EU – as well.

The international community must take a position and be actively involved in discussions on such a partnership. The purpose of the proposed new partnership agenda of joint responsibility between the EU (backed by the US) and Bosnia and Herzegovina could give a new impetus for the long overdue reforms. A new wind is blowing in Washington. Change is also possible in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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