
BOSNIAN GOVERNMENT BICKERING COSTS IT SEAT AT COUNCIL OF EUROPE ASSEMBLY

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Bosnian officials' failure to agree on the setup of certain public institutions since October elections has cost the country its place in the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), highlighting how the lack of a fully functional government is damaging its drive toward the European Union.

The Council of Europe said on April 8 that it had suspended Bosnia-Herzegovina from the assembly at least until the end of the year because the country was still unable to appoint new representatives within six months of the voting.

The move came three days after the council warned Bosnian officials of the deadline, saying that "the absence of a Bosnian parliamentary delegation to the assembly is a very bad signal on the ability of your country to honor its commitments in the fields of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights."

It was the second such failure this month after it couldn't name a point of contact for Europol, the European policing agency, and may hinder Bosnia's deeper integration into European institutions.

"This is the second time in the past seven days that the government has failed to reach an agreement on very simple, I would say, technical issues, which...are extremely important for Bosnia and all its citizens," said Predrag Kojovic, head of the pro-EU Our Party and a delegate in the House of Peoples of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"This is unacceptable and inexplicable," he added.

'We Will All Feel The Consequences'

More than two decades after a devastating war pulled the fledgling country apart along ethnic lines, the landlocked country of under 4 million people is still trying to shake off the effects.

Bosnia is run by a government that includes a three-member presidency drawn along ethnic lines and two autonomous political entities.

Parliamentary elections in October underlined the same divisive rhetoric that sparked fighting almost three decades ago and highlighted Bosnia's crossroads -- either it continues to try to deepen Euro-Atlantic ties or its ethnic rivalries further derail progress toward the EU and NATO and hamper economic and political efforts.

Senad Sepic, chairman of the last Bosnian delegation to the PACE, warned that politicians may be saying the right things in Brussels' eyes but their actions are actually geared toward "endless procrastination," given rampant corruption in public institutions.

"We may have different opinions on some political issues,... but there is no argument or justification for not being able to call a delegation to the Council of Europe's parliament," Sepic told RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "This is a big slap in the face to Bosnia, and we will all feel the consequences."

Bosnia is looking toward the bloc to help pull itself out of an economic malaise that has left it among the poorest countries in Europe, with its per capita economic output at about one-third of the EU average.

But it has struggled to meet deadlines and do substantial work on the reforms needed to begin meeting EU regulations.

Because of this, says Tonino Picula, head of the Delegation for Relations of the European Parliament with Bosnia and Kosovo, the country is languishing at a time when it can't afford to.

"Unlike many countries that are in the process of integration and who have some external problems, the problems in Bosnia are internal -- and some of them, obviously, are not being put aside for the sake of progress," Picula told RFE/RL.

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