

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH “Seize the Day”

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Police reform is fundamental to Bosnia and Herzegovina's journey from peace implementation to European integration. It is a reform that is urgently needed to improve the life of citizens. But it is also a precondition for the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union. Now, there is a real opportunity to reach an agreement on police reform and to secure the SAA. The opportunity must not be missed.

The seven parties that will form the new Council of Ministers today have committed themselves to a programme placing Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration – the clear desire of the majority of the country's citizens – at the top of the agenda. The very first point in their January platform is a commitment to reach an agreement on police reform. Now is the time to deliver on this promise.

The three EU principles – that all legislative and budgetary competencies for all police matters must be vested at the state level; that there can be no political interference with operational policing; and that functional local police areas must be determined by technical policing criteria – are an integral part of the October 2005 Agreement, endorsed by the state parliament and the parliaments of the two entities.

Since then, the principles have been developed by the Police Reform Directorate into a technical report that has been forwarded to the Council of Ministers. The Directorate's report has now been on the table for more than a month, with the result that all sides have had the time to review and consider its contents. Given the discussions over the past three years, the issues and possible solutions are already well known.

In order to keep to the commitments made in the October 2005 Political Agreement, entity and state governments and parliaments should have adopted an implementation plan no later than 2 March. This deadline will likely be missed. But as Political Directors of the Peace Implementation Council made clear in December, an agreement must be in place before the end of March.

If that does not happen, the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement will be delayed significantly, possibly until 2008. Political leaders should consider carefully whether they can afford to pass up this opportunity. Opinion-formers, citizens and the media, should also monitor carefully how leaders perform and whether they deliver on their commitments.

The Directorate's report is the result of many months of work and intensive deliberations among police experts. It is an excellent basis for moving forward and it provides for solutions that are acceptable to all. If necessary, my Office and other international partners are prepared to lend support to political talks.

The incentives to achieve agreement are enormous. Politicians who choose pragmatism and compromise over political grandstanding have everything to gain. Police reform is about more than paving the way to an SAA and anchoring Bosnia and Herzegovina in Europe; it is, above all, about making Bosnia and Herzegovina a safer and better place to live.

The sooner police reform is agreed and implemented, the sooner Bosnia and Herzegovina sets off on its journey to the European Union and the sooner this country's authorities will be able to tackle crime effectively. After many months of stagnation, this is the time for action. I expect the politicians of this country, in particular members of the new government and political party leaders, now to live up to their responsibilities.

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