

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: "The way forward"

It seems that everyone has a view as to the wisdom of the decision to close the Office of the High Representative next year and every person I speak with in this country has a different interpretation of my own position on the matter. Given the central role in implementing peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina that the OHR has played to date, this state of affairs is understandable. Clearly, however, discussion on the future international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina would benefit from additional clarity.

The decision to close the OHR that was taken by political directors of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) Steering Board at their June meeting is time-driven not event-driven. There is therefore no automatic linkage between implementation of specific reforms and the existence of the OHR. As a result, the OHR has already begun preparations to shut down on 30 June 2007 and those preparations are ongoing. At the same time and in parallel, the European Union is engaged in planning to create a reinforced Office of the EU Special Representative to be fully operational by the time the OHR closes.

The decision to close the OHR will be subject to the review and confirmation of PIC Steering Board political directors when they meet in February 2007 "taking into account the overall situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region". Clearly, I cannot pre-empt that decision. However, I can and will make clear the areas and issues that will influence the February deliberations. Indeed, that was precisely what I did when I visited Banja Luka last week.

In my discussions during that visit, I pointed out that little or no progress has been made in such key areas as police reform and went on to state the obvious: if the PIC Steering Board were to be confronted with a situation in February in which key reforms are blocked and, as a consequence, a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) cannot be signed with the European Commission, this might affect their final decision on whether and when OHR closes.

Delaying the closure of the OHR would not be in the interest of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is because this country has travelled as far as it can under international tutelage. Prolonging the existence of the OHR would only slow Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards European integration. Indeed, two years ago already, the European Union made it clear that the legislation required to launch the SAA would only be considered acceptable if enacted by the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina on their own.

To move forward, Bosnia and Herzegovina must take its destiny in its own hands; BiH politicians have to take responsibility for their country's future; and BiH citizens have to take ownership of the peace. To make sure that Bosnia and Herzegovina is successful in this endeavour, the country will benefit from the assistance it continues to require in the form of a robust engagement by the European Union. I am currently building the EUSR Office that will spearhead this new mode of engagement.

The future EUSR Office will have the mandate and resources it requires to be successful, to continue to promote all the major reforms currently underway, including police reform, and eventually to help prepare Bosnia and Herzegovina for EU membership.

The beauty and strength of the future EU presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that it brings together all the institutions best able to assist this country move forward – the European Commission, EUFOR, the EU Police Mission and my own EUSR Office. And it will be able to apply the full transformative power that the European Union has developed over the past decade in opening up the prospect of membership to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The reform agenda that is so crucial to the future of this country will not disappear with the closure of the OHR. In fact, it will intensify as Bosnia and Herzegovina moves closer to the European Union. Those who block reforms today may succeed in their immediate objectives, but the cost will be high. They would put off the day when this country earns the right to EU membership. They might also ensure that the OHR must remain on the scene. They would not, however, alter or obscure the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina's only guaranteed route to a secure

peace and prosperous life for its citizens runs via Brussels.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling is the international community's High Representative and European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.