

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Police Reform Is About Making BiH a Safer Place to Live”

Too many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina live in fear that they or their families will be attacked, that their homes will be burgled or that their cars will be stolen.

The sooner police reform is agreed and implemented, the sooner the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina can tackle crime effectively.

This fact has been lost in the recent controversy over the failure of the government of Republika Srpska to cooperate in bringing the work of the Police Directorate to a successful conclusion.

The point of police restructuring is to give citizens better policing. It is as simple as that. And the current process under way within the Directorate is about police professionals proposing the best technical solutions for police reform.

Let us review the facts.

In October 2005, the parliaments of both entities as well as of Bosnia and Herzegovina endorsed a Police Reform Agreement committing them to restructuring the police in line with three principles laid down by the European Union. These are the following: that all legislative and budgetary competencies for police matters must be vested at the state level; that there should be no political interference with operational policing; and that functional local police areas should be determined by technical policing criteria, where operational command is exercised at the local level.

The text of the Police Reform Agreement was proposed by Milorad Dodik and Dragan Cavic; and it was accepted by Federation-based parties, the international community and the European Union. The National Assembly of Republika Srpska, the Federation Parliament and the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina all endorsed it.

In the Agreement, the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and both entities also committed themselves to supporting the work of a Police Directorate, which would prepare an expert proposal on an implementation plan for restructuring the police system.

The Directorate was duly established by a vote of the Council of Ministers last December. In this way, it was also endorsed by Serb Ministers nominated by the leading political parties in Republika Srpska.

After the Directorate finished its proposed implementation plan, the entity and state governments and parliaments would need to make any necessary changes and then to endorse the result.

That plan still stands. It was that plan that the European Union agreed to.

That is why Javier Solana was obliged to remind this country's political establishment last week that the European Union only agreed to launch talks on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) after it had been assured through the Police Reform Agreement, that the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina were serious about tackling crime.

By putting this plan in doubt, the authorities of Republika Srpska are risking delaying finalisation of the SAA, thereby setting back Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress on the road to Europe.

Police reform will re-enter the arena of political discussion after the Directorate finishes its work. Governments and parliaments will then adopt the final reform. This is the process laid out in the Political Agreement.

But this discussion will be based on the document produced by the Directorate. By reducing its presence in the Directorate, Republika Srpska is only undermining its own ability to shape the reform.

The Police Reform Agreement was a huge advance for Bosnia and Herzegovina, because it charted the way forward. It pointed to a clear path away from the chronic crime and corruption, which has become a scourge of daily life in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Police professionals, politicians, the European Union and, most importantly, Bosnia and Herzegovina 's citizens agree that this country must fight crime more effectively.

Ignoring the process designed to get Bosnia and Herzegovina to more efficient and effective policing benefits nobody. Worse still, it is undermining efforts – including mine – to achieve a more liberal visa regime for citizens of this country in the European Union.

Although I choose not to intervene in issues that should be dealt with by domestic authorities, I am monitoring closely how the institutions of the country operate and, in particular, how politicians behave on the key issues for the future of this country.

One thing is clear. It is in everyone's interest to see the work of the Police Directorate through. Police reform will help make Bosnia and Herzegovina safer and it will make life in Bosnia and Herzegovina better.

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