

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Countries Cannot Simply Stand Still”

There is a mistaken belief – dangerously common among some of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s leaders – that when the country isn’t moving forward it is standing still. For a few months, they seem to think, we can stop making progress on getting into Europe, on creating jobs, on improving government services – and after doing nothing for a while, once we’ve got our political act together, we can take up where we left off.

In the real world things don’t work like that. The truth is that when a country stops moving forward it starts moving backward – there is no standing still.

The Central European states that successfully joined the European Union moved forward continuously for a period of years, often at almost breakneck speed, and many of them only just managed to get everything done in time for full membership. Their leaders understood that those countries simply could not afford to move backwards. Why would Bosnia and Herzegovina be different?

This week EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, a man who has maintained an exceptionally close and supportive engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina since he took office in the autumn of 2004, made it clear that this country’s effort to secure closer integration with the European Union has stalled. In a letter to Prime Minister Nikola Spiric, Commissioner Rehn warned that unless there is a political change of course Bosnia and Herzegovina would never reach a point where it can sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Prime Minister Spiric has a difficult task – he must run a government many of whose ministers represent parties whose commitment to joining Europe appears to be only rhetorical. The Prime Minister was obliged this week to acknowledge that regarding police reform – and without police reform Bosnia and Herzegovina can say goodbye to further EU integration – there is currently not enough political will to move forward.

This does not mean that Bosnia and Herzegovina will stand still. It means that Bosnia and Herzegovina will start to move backward.

The real tragedy is that success in taking the next step to Europe, success in attracting investment, creating jobs and raising living standards, success in securing police reform and other measures required to unblock the road forward – success in all these areas is tantalisingly close, as Commissioner Rehn also made clear this week when he pointed out that “a bright European future” is within reach for Bosnia and Herzegovina – but only if its leaders reach out and seize that future.

They can do that.

Yesterday in Zagreb, the other countries in the region delivered a resounding vote of confidence in the future of this country when they agreed to locate the Secretariat of the new Regional Cooperation Council (which will take over from the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe) in Sarajevo. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Ministers responsible for regional cooperation, diplomats and senior civil servants have all worked hard and effectively to bring about this result. It will place Bosnia and Herzegovina where it belongs, in the very heart of the region.

This is something I lobbied for even before I became High Representative. It is also a move that should serve as a much needed reminder that moving forward is infinitely better than moving backward – because just as every short-sighted exercise in political obstruction generates momentum in the wrong direction, every far-sighted, creative exercise in political pragmatism generates momentum in the right direction.

The leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina have received a wake-up call this week: you are taking your country down

the wrong road. At the same time, the region's leaders have expressed confidence that this country can succeed and will succeed. The main problem in recent months is that too many politicians seem to have thought that they had the luxury of standing still.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling is High Representative of the international community and EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.