

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Compromise and Reform or Throw Away Golden Opportunity”

Two of Europe's most influential officials are in Bosnia and Herzegovina today: Olli Rehn, the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement, and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO's Secretary General. They are here because Bosnia and Herzegovina has a real chance of integrating successfully in Euro-Atlantic structures. They are also here because the international community continues to view what happens in this country as important.

By now I believe everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina understands that the country cannot make further progress towards membership of the European Union and NATO – two outcomes that the vast majority of citizens fervently want and desperately need – unless its political leaders abandon zero-sum politics and return to the kind of constructive engagement with one another that has delivered positive results in recent years.

The record of the past year is not good. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to join NATO's Partnership-for-Peace programme at the Alliance's Riga Summit, and although its EU negotiating team successfully concluded the technical groundwork for the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, the reform process stalled ahead of the elections last year as key political leaders reverted to the aggressive yet arid rhetoric of the 1990s.

This is the state in which we find ourselves today.

It has to change – and change quickly – if we are to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. This is still possible. It is what the people, in every community, in every part of the country, in every age group, want.

Bosnia and Herzegovina secured membership of NATO's Partnership-for-Peace programme after it had successfully launched and substantially implemented ambitious defence reforms.

These reforms are not yet complete. To take just one example, property still has to be transferred to the Defence Ministry so that it can discharge its fundamental duty of ensuring the peace and security of the country and its people. And among the principles set out in the PFP basic documents is a binding commitment to honour international treaty obligations, which means full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

If Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to join NATO it will have to take defence reform much, much further initially within the framework of the Partnership for Peace and eventually that of the Membership Action Plan, a tailored programme that helps countries prepare themselves for membership.

In the case of the European Union, signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement would, quite simply, launch the integration process.

As everyone knows, Commissioner Rehn had hoped to be in a position to initial an SAA. As everyone also knows, this is conditional on police restructuring, public broadcasting reform, public administration reform and ICTY cooperation.

Each of these initiatives is designed to distance Bosnia and Herzegovina from a failed past and bring it into the European mainstream. These reforms will deliver real benefits. If fundamental changes are successfully introduced in the police service, the armed forces, the public broadcasting system and elsewhere, so as to meet EU and NATO standards, citizens in this country will be able to begin living in a way that is comparable to that enjoyed by citizens elsewhere on the continent.

Yesterday, Commissioner Rehn initialled an SAA with Montenegro. This step demonstrates that the European Union is serious about including all countries in Southeastern Europe. But this also means that Bosnia and Herzegovina risks becoming the only country in the region lacking a formal contractual relationship with the European Union.

As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina risks falling behind all its neighbours and even behind countries that its citizens would once have resented being compared to.

The choice facing Bosnia and Herzegovina's leaders is stark. Compromise, reform and integrate in the European mainstream – or throw away this golden opportunity. It is not, in my view and in the view of most citizens, a difficult choice.

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