Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Police Reform End Game”

Political problems are usually easy to understand, but sometimes politicians find it in their interest to make them appear unusually complicated. Police reform is a case in point.

On 5 October 2005, Republika Srpska’s National Assembly adopted the agreement on police reform, including the provision that: “All legislative and budgetary competencies for all police matters must be vested at the State level.” Shortly afterwards, the same agreement was adopted by the State and Federation parliaments.

This was the commitment that the European Union had been waiting for to open negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). Brussels accepted this commitment in good faith and expressed trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina ’s ability to move forward on police reform in line with three principles laid out by the European Commission. Today, the European Union expects the Police Reform Directorate to deliver a police reform plan before the end of the year. And it expects the governments and parliaments of Republika Srpska, the Federation and the State to adopt a reform plan by March 2007 at the latest.

Recently, a number of proposals have been put forward with regard to the budget. All good ideas are welcome. At the same time, I do not believe that police reform requires wholesale fiscal reform. Rather, the best solution for financing the new police structure is the same mechanism as is already used to

fund the operations of SIPA and the State Border Service, namely the regular state budgeting system

In this way, police officers throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina will know that they receive the same pay for the same job and have the same benefits and support wherever they serve. In any case, given the importance of the first EC principle, any proposal on the budget will have to be checked extremely carefully to ensure that it is in compliance with EU requirements.

The European Union wants police reform because it needs a single counterpart with the legislative authority to deal with and implement the many justice and home affairs issues required in the accession process. European and international police forces require a single interlocutor with whom they can discuss operational matters. And Bosnia and Herzegovina needs police reform to combat organised crime, illegal migration and international terrorism, all of which – among other things – are undermining this country's revitalization.

That is why I am confident that an agreement on police reform that both respects the wishes of the citizens of this country and fulfils the three EC principles will be reached. However, the time to move the police reform process forward is now.

The Police Reform Directorate is currently finishing its report, a report that leaves room for discussion and modification. Now is the time for the parties to seek solutions on police reform, which are in compliance with the three EC principles and which would enable the Directorate to issue a proposal on police reform implementation that is based on a sound political consensus.

This is a unique opportunity for the newly elected leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina to secure the country's European future.

If, however, police reform cannot be agreed, anyone who

blocked an agreement would be responsible for delaying the signature of the SAA and denying the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina the benefits that come with EU integration – visa-free travel, economic assistance and technical support, access to markets, thereby creating a climate attracting more international investment to create jobs, and to build better education and health care.

The sooner politicians unblock the police reform process, the sooner citizens throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina will see these benefits. The issue is as simple as that.

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