

Article by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Don’t Cheer Too Soon About OHR’s Closure”

Abolition of High Representative’s post is signal for Bosnia and Herzegovina to take charge of its destiny.

By Christian Schwarz-Schilling in Sarajevo (Balkan Insight, 7 July 06)

The decision of the Peace Implementation Council, which represents 55 governments and agencies engaged in supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina’s post-war recovery, to close the Office of the High Representative, OHR, by next June, has provoked alarm in some quarters and euphoria in others.

Both reactions are wrong and indicate a lack of understanding of the significance of this decision.

Eleven-and-a-half years since the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war, it is time for Bosnia and Herzegovina to move beyond peace implementation towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s post-war recovery has entered a new phase, which is a logical consequence of the phases that have gone before and represents a progression, not a change of direction.

The international community remains fully committed to Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign state whose territorial integrity is guaranteed by international treaty. This is true now and will be true after the OHR has closed.

The challenge facing the authorities of the country is to make the sovereign state fully functional and integrate it more deeply with the rest of Europe .

If Bosnia and Herzegovina aspires to Euro-Atlantic integration, it has to take control of its own destiny.

Although my predecessors as High Representatives were able to take the peace process forward using the so-called Bonn powers, the limits of that approach have been reached.

Bosnia and Herzegovina will not be invited to join the European Union and NATO by decree of the High Representative but by its own efforts.

The road from Dayton to Brussels goes via Sarajevo , Banja Luka , Mostar, and every city, town and village in Bosnia and Herzegovina .

The closure of the OHR does not mean the international community is withdrawing from Bosnia and Herzegovina but represents a shift in the nature and application of the international engagement.

The international community will remain fully involved in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a reinforced engagement by the EU, through the Stabilisation and Association process, through the work of an expanded EU Special Representative’s Office, and through the continued presence of EUFOR, the EU Police Mission, NATO and other international actors.

I myself will remain the EU Special Representative, continuing to coordinate the activities of the international community, facilitate progress and advise the country’s authorities.

Now, however, there is a clear timeframe within which the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina must take decisive steps to rationalise and consolidate the country’s institutions, ensure its economic viability and take it further along the path of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Peace Implementation Council will review and confirm the June 30 OHR closing date when it meets early next year.

Before then, the governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina would do well to accelerate the process of enacting the reform legislation that will deliver tangible benefits to the people.

The Stabilisation and Association process is a key mechanism for taking this process forward, but it is not of itself the principal driving force. The principal spur is the explicit aspiration of most citizens to live in a state that is democratic, secure, prosperous and fully integrated in Europe .

In the final analysis, the primary incentive for politicians to speed up the pace of reform is not to fulfil the requirements of Euro-Atlantic integration, or satisfy other benchmarks set by the international community.

The real incentive is that by accelerating reforms, they will accelerate improvements in living conditions and make life better and more secure for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina .

The international community is not about to jeopardise the stability it has helped to build in Bosnia and Herzegovina and will be closely monitoring how domestic institutions function. The option of waiting for the OHR to close before sabotaging the peace process does not exist.

If this country's institutions fail to rise to the challenge; if there is a threat to peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina ; or if there is a threat to peace and stability in the wider region, the Peace Implementation Council will respond accordingly.

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