

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, at the Press Conference on the consequences of failing to Agree to Police Reform

The purpose of this press conference is to deliver to the SDS led Government of the RS a simple stark and united message from Washington, from Brussels, and from the international community. And the message is simple. Think again – before it is too late.

Just over a week has passed since the RS Government, and the RSNA, blocked police restructuring, and in so doing, dashed this country's hopes. The only future that this country can have.

We in the international community have left a little time for people to reflect on the consequences of that decision for the SDS, for the RS Government, for the citizens of the RS and BiH as a whole. But it is now time to give the first stage of our considered response.

There has been much speculation about what I will announce today and in the coming weeks – some of it accurate, some of it less accurate.

I will not dwell on that aspect today.

If the SDS-led RS Government persists in this path, it will face the consequences of its actions, as sure as night follows day, and we will have, I regret, plenty of time to set out our response. One cannot expect to wreck an entire country's hopes with impunity, and if the SDS-led RS Government insists on doing so, it will suffer the consequences that come with isolation – but let us remember that the people who will suffer most will be the people of the RS. For them the cost of isolation will be fewer jobs, more poverty, no chance of visa free travel, and no question of joining the rest of the region on the road to Europe

There is no danger for the RS in police restructuring: there is a real danger in opting for total isolation.

So I want to focus this morning on what the SDS led RS Government's decisions mean – not for the politicians, but for the people of the RS, and the people of this country as a whole.

And we want to set out, once again, our complete determination – mine, the EU's, the United States', the rest of the International Community – to see this reform succeed, however difficult it may be, however much the RS may try to block it, however long it may take.

The European Union has been very clear that it wants BiH, and the rest of this region, to join the Union.

That offer remains on the table today just as it did a week ago. It will stay on the table next week, next month, next year.

But if you want to join the club, you have to meet the standards it sets.

Police restructuring is one of the last requirements it has set for BiH. It will remain one of the requirements – next week, next month, next year.

No police restructuring means no negotiations on an SAA, and no progress towards Europe – it means isolation. It's as simple as that.

So the people of the RS need to be very clear about where their SDS-led government is leading them.

Now, there is a wider issue that we may wish to return to.

Police reform is not the only area of obstruction from the SDS-led RS Government. But police reform is currently the central issue.

By blocking police restructuring, they are taking the RS into isolation.

When they could have chosen integration, they have instead chosen the political equivalent of solitary confinement.

This makes BiH – and within it the RS – the only country in the whole of Europe, apart from Belarus, without a contractual relationship with the EU. Do the people of the RS really want that – to choose Belarus over Brussels?

It means that while Serbia and Montenegro gets ready to start SAA negotiations in a few weeks' time, BiH is stuck on the sidelines, friendless and alone, as their neighbour overtakes them on the road to Europe. Do the people of the RS really want that?

It means that all the benefits of joining Europe – jobs, freer travel, higher living standards – the benefits that countries such as Hungary and Slovenia now take for granted, will not go to BiH but to BiH's neighbours, but not here, because of the obstinate intransigence of the RS Government. Is that what the people of the RS really want?

That is not what we want, and that is not what anyone in BiH should accept.

Police restructuring will have to happen if BiH – and the RS – want to join the EU, and begin to enjoy the benefits of closer association with the EU even before they join.

The question is not whether police restructuring will happen, but when: the longer it takes for the RS Government to reach agreement, the more damage it will inflict on the RS, and the people of this country as a whole.

So the RS Government now has an urgent choice to make – this is the eleventh hour – police restructuring that meets EU principles; or to condemn their people to isolation and to suffer the consequences.

The choice is theirs, and theirs alone. It needs to be made now. I hope they make the right choice.