

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown at the Press Conference on Events in the Council Of Ministers

I just want to comment briefly on yesterday's developments in the Council of Ministers, and as we see it, their significance for what happens in the second half of this year.

Two and a half years ago when this government was elected to power, I said that I saw it as my job to work with them to squeeze out of them as much reform as possible, with Europe as our target. And a lot of reform has been completed.

Now we have reached a hiatus.

There are two possible conclusions of recent events.

The first is that BiH's governments, having done so much, now cannot do more. They have reached the end of the process of reform and cannot deliver more.

If this is true, the country is now at dead stop until the next elections; BiH is at the back of the queue – indeed not in the queue at all – on the road to Europe; the ruling parties have lost their opportunity and the opposition parties gained one, and BiH's future is on hold.

There is another explanation of recent events.

That this is all a bout of summer madness.

Which of these options is true we cannot yet tell. But I intend to proceed on the basis that it is the second of these explanations which applies. That this is not a halt, but only a pause in the reform process, until or unless it is proved otherwise.

As we made plain in our statement yesterday, it is not clear to me – to put the point very gently – how the decision announced yesterday is designed to promote the reforms that this country so badly needs. It is a matter of record that I strongly advised Prime Minister Terzic against it in a forty-five minute meeting yesterday.

There will be those who rush to judgement and who say that this government, this Council of Ministers, having achieved some significant reforms, has now run out of steam and that no more can be expected of them.

That they have gone so far down the road to Europe, but now they've gone off down a side road and someone else should take the wheel.

And there will be others who say that politicians – like everyone else – are human, and occasionally do things that are born of exasperation and frustration.

Now – perhaps because I am a politician myself – I am willing, in this case, for the moment at least, to take the latter view.

I know how difficult it is to move things forward in BiH, and how, sometimes it gets to you.

So, I am frankly much less interested in what happened yesterday, than what happens tomorrow, and the day after, and next week and next month. In short, I'm much less interested in what happened yesterday, than in what happens next.

That is the issue for the PM and for the Council of Ministers to address – how they intend to move forward from here, to resolve this affair, and get back to work.

Because the hard cold fact is that this country has no alternative to sorting things out and to returning as rapidly as possible to the business of government, and to the hard grind of reform.

That is the case today, just as much as it was when we had the last bout of political games back in December and January.

On that occasion, I said it was for this country's political leaders to work out a way forward, and to their great credit, they did so.

And they must do the same again now.

It will be a test of the political maturity of this country's political leaders how rapidly they can do so. This country simply cannot afford to lose the time that a stalemate born of frustration and personality clashes in government would bring.

This country has, in the last two years, got closer to the gates of Europe – to the EU – than many thought possible. We have a handful of key reforms to see through, above all police restructuring: until we have done so, we are so near to that goal, but yet so far.

I remain convinced, because I'm an optimist that, provided common sense prevails, we can still qualify to start negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement in time for the tenth anniversary of the Dayton Accords, and in so doing that we can with common sense catch up with Serbia and Montenegro, and others on the road to membership of the European Union.

But if we are to do so, we have a lot to do, and we need to start getting back to work. The RS has to resolve police restructuring in line with the EU's principles. And the Council of Ministers needs to get back to work, and to demonstrate to the European Union that it is a serious partner with which to negotiate.

I go Brussels on Tuesday to see Commissioner Rehn and Dr Solana and I will want to discuss the next steps on the Feasibility Study — that is what I want to be able to report.

So, you ask, what is my policy following yesterday's events?

Those who make reform their first priority can count on my support. Those who do not, cannot.

This country's future does not lie with political games and personality clashes. It lies in the opportunity of Europe that lies ahead of us. That is the agenda and we need to return to it as soon as possible – if the greatest opportunity this country has ever had to win a secure and prosperous future is not to be lost.

So, I want to see this political turbulence brought to an end as rapidly as possible. And I look to PM Terzic to take the lead in that task, by bringing together the relevant parties in order to resolve this issue quickly and to get back to work on the reforms necessary to put the country back on the road to Europe.

That is what I expect of him and his colleagues now: and if that is what they do, they will continue to have my support and that of the International Community.