

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown at the Press Conference Responding to RSNA Conclusions

I had hoped this would be an upbeat press conference but it's a bleak one. I had hoped to be able to talk about the future. I had hoped to announce this morning that this country was, at last, joining its neighbours on the way to Europe.

I had hoped to be able to announce, as a result, a series of initiatives which would have marked the beginning of the process which will lead to the end of the Office of the High Representative and the beginning of the transition to a European Union Special Representative; and the transfer of key competences from the OHR back to the institutions of this country.

I had hoped, in other words, to welcome the fact that this country had taken a decisive step towards putting the past behind it, and had turned its face, at last, to the future.

That is what I had hoped to be able to do.

But last night the RSNA turned its back on the future by voting to block police reform in the clearest manner possible, and in so doing, voting to block this country's path to the European Union.

This is a hugely damaging decision – not just for the RS, but for every citizen in this country. That damage, at present, cannot be overstated.

In the last few days we saw how the mood in the EU is changing. This is not a good time to put your country at the back of the queue on the road to Europe or take it off that road altogether.

Today I want to describe to you how we got here – who bears the responsibility, who will pay the cost and what happens next.

But first, the wider context.

There will, of course, be those, commenting from the sidelines who will say that, since these are nationalist parties, no reform could be expected.

I have to be blind to what parties are, or to what they call themselves – my job is to work with the government that is elected, whoever it is. That's called democracy.

But it is worth recording that these present Governments – in the entities and at the State level – we have not been unable to reform in BiH.

In fact, over the last two and a half years BiH has seen the greatest body of reforms ever carried out in this country – a state judicial and legal system; a single state-wide command for the Entity armies; a single intelligence service; a single taxation system; a single customs service; one Mostar; one SIPA; and a real breakthrough in transferring was criminals to the Hague.

All the reforms over the last three years have one end.

So that BiH can start on the road to Europe and on the path to the Atlantic institutions.

That has been our aim and my personal passion these last three years.

And lets be fair, all of this, let me say, has been more

difficult for the RS than for the Federation.

And all of this is now placed in grave jeopardy by the events last night.

All of this could now be thrown away, by the events of last night.

Because the whole point of all these efforts was to open the gates to the European Union, and without police reform, those gates will remain firmly shut against BiH.

The RS in particular, having come so far, has finally, it seems, turned its back on the future – and turned its back on BiH's future, too.

So how did we get here?

Well police reform – the last great reform – was always going to be the most difficult for the RS – but it was not impossible.

At Vlasic, there was real compromise – a real will to succeed. During the last hours of the meeting on Vlasic the RS parties were even discussing in detail the very cross IEHL police areas, which they rejected yesterday.

So we left Vlasic with high hopes.

And something happened in between.

By the time we got to Konak the RS government put that progress into reverse. Their representative on the Maps Commission blocked everything.

Where Vlasic succeeded Konak has failed.

Nevertheless we left Konak, still with some hope.

President Cavic, speaking both for his Party and the Government promised to recommend to the RSNA a change in

mandate to allow the RS delegates to negotiate for success, not failure.

And the RS opposition parties promised to back him if he did. A promise repeated during the debate yesterday.

And at first it seemed as though he would.

Even until late last night, it seemed as though he would. But then something happened in between.

At the very end of last night's session the RS Government, under Prime Minister Bukejlovic – having refused to give a lead all day – suddenly finished it all by choosing the path of isolation for the RS, instead of the path of Europe for the whole country.

So, who bears the chief responsibility for this lost opportunity?

Not the RS opposition parties. They contributed strongly with the opposition from the FBiH to the success of Vlastic – and they made it clear to the very end that if the Government gave a lead for reform they would back them.

No – the main responsibility for this terrible wasted opportunity lies firmly and squarely with the RS Government – and especially with its majority ruling party, the SDS.

And with that responsibility must come a cost.

But whatever that cost to politicians may prove to be, over the next days and weeks let us be clear, the biggest price will be paid, not by the politicians but by the people of BiH – and especially by the citizens of the RS.

The road to Europe will remain closed for the country until, as must happen in the end, the Government of Republika Srpska is prepared to adhere to European standards.

Maybe that doesn't matter too much to the RS's leaders – they have jobs and official passports. They're the lucky ones. They can travel freely around Europe, unlike their voters who have to queue for hours for visas. They have regular pay cheques. Unlike their voters, too many of whom are without jobs.

But it will matter very much to the citizens who need international investment for new jobs and had those hopes killed last night.

Who want a chance of visa free travel to Europe – and lost that last night.

Who want to join Serbia and Montenegro on the road to Europe – and got left behind last night.

And it will matter very much, too, to every other citizen in this country who woke up this morning to discover that, once again, the Party founded by Radovan Karadzic has shown itself incapable of looking to the future and, once again, placed a blight on the future of the whole country.

So, what comes next?

Let me make it quite clear. I cannot break this logjam.

The European Commission has, quite rightly, said that getting to Europe means BiH politicians doing it, not the High Representative.

BiH – and the RS, their politicians themselves – have to meet those standards.

But until they do, the rest of Europe won't wait. This region will not move towards Europe at the pace of the slowest ship in the convoy.

So the longer Karadzic's party and the SDS-led RS Government continue to block police reform, the further BiH will get left

behind, not just the rest of this region, but the rest of the Europe.

Let me spell out precisely what this means so there is no misunderstanding.

BiH is now the only country in the Western Balkans, which has no contractual relationship with the European Union, or isn't negotiating one. Croatia does. FYROM does. Albania is negotiating one; Serbia and Montenegro is about to start.

But it's not just within the Balkan region that BiH finds itself isolated and alone. Thanks to the RS Government, Bosnia and Herzegovina is now practically the only country from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, with the exception of Belarus , without any legal agreement with the European Union, and all the benefits that those agreements deliver in terms of trade, in terms of jobs, in terms of prosperity and security.

So what next? Well some consequences will follow quickly.

Meanwhile, the European Commission's conditions stand. They will not change.

They will still be there when the RS Government and the SDS return to the negotiating table – whether that happens next week, next month, and next year.

So it now falls to the RS Government to find a way out of this impasse, and to find it very quickly. It has to summon up the courage and the leadership it spectacularly failed to show last night.

It has, in short, to show the EU and the international community whether it is a party for Europe; or, as appears to be the case from last night's vote, a party for isolation.

That is the result of last night's decision by the RS government.

But let me make one thing very clear: to choose isolation cannot be cost free.