

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, at the Press Conference on Police Restructuring

Thank you for coming.

As you know the subject of our press conference I need hardly tell you is police reform. As you know the multi-party talks on police restructuring failed last night. Before I say anything let me say that this isn't the end, necessarily. The position is serious, but recoverable. But it is the end for the moment and unless there is a change of view, unless the RS politicians who finally couldn't bring themselves to accept the European principles change that view, then it will be the end in a more definitive form. But the position is, let me preface my remarks, still recoverable and it's important that we should say that. The talks have failed. It requires a change of circumstance before they could be recommenced. But it is still possible that this thing can be pulled around, it can even be pulled around in time. I want to explain for a moment why they have failed, what that means for Bosnia and Herzegovina and where we go from here.

But a word first of all if I may, about the context which BiH now finds itself in. Bosnia and Herzegovina is, or until last night was, on the threshold of what is arguably the most historic moment in the country's history since the Dayton Agreement was passed. It was on the verge of being given the green light to start negotiations on a stabilization and association process with the European Union and therefore join

the whole of the rest of the region on the road to Europe . What is now certain is that that immediate opportunity has been lost. Perhaps not forever, but certainly for the moment. On Thursday as you all know a team of the European Commission will arrive in Sarajevo to assess whether BiH meets the conditions needed for that green light to be given.

The main outstanding issue indeed, as a result of the vote today on PBS, probably the only outstanding issue that stands in the way of that green light is the need to get an agreement on police restructuring. Such an agreement, as we know, has to meet the three principles that the European Commission has laid down. One of those requires that police areas should be drawn up on the basis of what makes most sense for police, not what makes most sense for politicians and political control. Till yesterday the signs were good, actually the signs were very good. I said after the successful Vlašić talks that if the spirit of Vlašić continued then I believe this could be done. Unfortunately the spirit of Vlašić did not continue.

Nevertheless let us recall that for months now and especially in the weeks since those constructive and disciplined talks on police reform took place at Vlašić, the people of this country and myself had good reason to believe that the Task Force's assessment of BiH's fulfillment of the Feasibility Study's requirements would be positive. A positive decision, a positive assessment given on Thursday, three weeks later, the formal decision, three or four weeks later being given at the Council of Ministers, that's the formal decision. But a positive assessment would have opened the door for the Commission to recommend that the EU begin Stabilization and Association negotiations in BiH, and BiH can embark on that historic road that leads to the European Union. In other words BiH two days from now was scheduled to make that historic first step towards Europe with all the material, practical and political advantages for its citizens that that quantum leap would bring. Well that is almost certain now not

to happen. I spoke this morning to Commissioner Olli Rehn, and I can say that that is now almost certain not to happen. Now what does that mean? It means no prospect for visa free access, it means no prospect of new investments, it means no end to the hemorrhage of the talents of our young, it means no change to the heavyweight international presence in this country, it means no secure future for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I know some say that the RS would be threatened by the police reform, I say the opposite. The truth is that the future of the RS is more threatened by not agreeing to police reform and being a barrier on the road to Europe . So now instead of joining Serbia and Montenegro and even Albania, even Albania in negotiating its way to Europe, BiH looks as though it will be left behind until its politicians decide whether they are prepared to meet the standards that Europe sets. The questions are these: Is that what the people of this country really want? Is that what the citizens of the RS really want, 66 percent (%) of whom in a recent opinion poll said that they wanted only one future and that was a future in the European Union. Is that what the RSNA really wants?

Now I have little doubt, frankly, a bleak comment, but I have little doubt that last night's failure will be applauded by some on the streets of Banja Luka today. But I have little doubt as well that that failure will be cursed by hundreds of thousands in this country, including in the RS who woke up this morning to discover that their European future was stolen from them overnight. I hope in the coming days and weeks their voices will be heard too.

So, what happens now? Answer: ask the RS? Because the ball is now firmly in the RS's court, they could still turn this around if they wish in the RSNA by giving their politicians the mandate to negotiate for success, not failure. It's still possible to turn that around. I understand that an RSNA session addressing that issue will be held on Monday. If they now give their politicians a mandate to negotiate for success,

we can still achieve those targets. If not, we are locked where we are. The ball lies with the RSNA.

So, how did we get here? Well the answer is simple. The police restructuring talks broke down because RS politicians could not in the end accept the European Commission's three principles. They could not accept the principle that policing regions must cross the entity borderline where necessary, not everywhere, not on principle, but where necessary, in the relatively small number of areas necessary to cross the IEBl in order to fulfill that European Union requirement. And in doing so of course, they backed away from, I could use a stronger word but I won't, they backed away from the agreements, which they made in Vlačić, I regret to have to say.

Now let me remind you what the EU's three principles are:

- A police service with all the legislative and budgetary competencies vested at the State Level – that was agreed largely at Vlačić,
- The police areas drawn up on the grounds of functionality, not of political control, and
- No political interference in policing.

Those are the principles, and let me make it absolutely, abundantly, totally clear – these principles are not going to change. The European Union is not going to alter its rules so that little Bosnia and Herzegovina can join. Those principles will remain the same. They will not be changed by demonstrations on the streets of Banja Luka, they will not be changed by protests, they will not be changed by resignations. They will be there for the RS and the RSNA to consider, the same conditions and the same current requirements, one week from now, one month from now, one year from now, one decade from now if that's how long it must take. The simple truth is BiH must apply these principles if it wants to integrate with the rest of Europe. If it does it can, if it doesn't it can't. It's as simple as that.

So the question is – how long will your politicians make you wait? Don't ask me, ask the RS politicians. The ball lies now with the Republica Srpska.

I'm not going to call more police reform talks. I'm not going to waste more time. When the RS is ready to negotiate for success they can tell us and we can continue. Until they are ready there is nothing further that anybody can do.

So let me sum up. Serious damage, serious damage, including to the dreams of hundreds of thousands of citizens of this country, was done last night. But the situation can still be saved. It's not about political parties, it's about the willingness of political parties to grasp opportunities and lead this country to Europe. A small number of politicians can turn this severe setback for the people of BiH into a step forward and they can do so very quickly. It cannot be now other than a delayed victory, but it can be a victory nevertheless. But this will only happen if those who claim to be on the side of reform, on the side of the people, on the side of the future, act decisively, consistently and soon. And that action now lies in one quarter and in one place, it lies in the RS and in the RSNA. The ball is in their court and the world will be watching how they now play it.

Your questions?