

High Representative Calls for Agreement on Police Reform to Enter Europe

The outcome of police reform negotiations among the main BiH political parties, scheduled to begin this Sunday, will “open up the future of BiH – or close it down,” the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said today in a speech to the RS National Assembly.

“There are two options: a bright future and a dark one,” the High Representative said. “Membership of the European Union is the only future that offers BiH prosperity, security, and stability. You can choose this option if you want to. But there is a black option, too. And, you can choose that as well.”

If the political parties fail to reach an agreement that meets the three core principles laid down by the European Commission – exclusive police competency at the BiH level, but operational control at the local level; police areas drawn up on the grounds of operational efficiency, not political control; and no political interference in policing – then, the High Representative warned, BiH will be the only country left behind as all the rest of the Balkans moves down the path to Europe. The danger of this is particularly acute, he added, now that the EC has agreed to begin Stabilisation and Association negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro .

The High Representative pointed out that just four weeks remain before the EU decides on whether to open Stabilisation and Association negotiations with BiH. There is no time to lose.

“In the next few weeks, when you decide on police reform, you will decide whether you join Serbia and Montenegro on the path

to Europe – or whether you and the rest of BiH remain cut out, cut off, and left behind. The only country in the Balkans isolated from Europe. This is your choice. And let me warn you. It may not come again any time soon.”

He reiterated that Europe’s core principles are non-negotiable. The EU will not change its rules to let BiH in. “If BiH will not change itself to meet Europe’s rules, BiH stays out.”

Failure to reach agreement on police reform, the High Representative said, would result in “no new jobs, no foreign investment, no foreign travel, no end to the haemorrhage of your youngest and your brightest and your best – who see no future here; no change to the heavyweight foreign presence here, whose job will be, not to help you move forward, but to prevent you moving backwards and creating instability in a region moving away from the path to Europe.”

The High Representative emphasized that “there is no hidden agenda in police reform,” and he made it clear that “there is no plot to open up, by clandestine means, the question of Constitutional Reform. This is not an attack on the Republika Srpska. There is no attempt to abolish the Entities. This does not mean that the RS MuP has to be abolished. This does not involve taking away the right of the democratically elected institutions of BiH, to oversee in the work of the police. This does not constitute an attack on the policemen and women of BiH.”

But he also stressed that “this is not just about Europe. It’s about what your citizens want and need.” The people of BiH, he said, want to replace the rule of criminals by the rule of law.

He said the most important object of reform was to give the police the resources they need to do their jobs properly – decent pay, better equipment, and comparable conditions

throughout the country to fight crime.

The High Representative reminded the RSNA delegates that 79 percent of RS citizens want BiH to join the EU and that more than half support the establishment of a State-level police service, if it means BiH gets to Europe. A clear 59 percent of RS citizens think that criminals have more influence over politicians, than ordinary citizens, and 77 percent of citizens say that police need to do more to fight crime.

The full text of the High Representative's speech can be accessed on the OHR website.