

Article by the Principal Deputy High Representative, Donald Hays: “Reforms Matter Because they Benefit Citizens”

This week the EC announced its interim assessment of Bosnia and Herzegovina's efforts to fulfil the Feasibility Study requirements. The assessment is not wholly positive. Unless the pace of reform changes, a golden opportunity for BiH could be slipping away.

I believe at least part of the problem may be an inability to understand *why* reforms matter and a corresponding inability to explain to the public *how* reforms will improve the quality of life in BiH.

Take the example of the State Veterinary Office. It took the BiH authorities an unconscionably long time to set this body up. Yet its function is crucial to the prosperity of BiH and its citizens. The SVO is now setting up a system for certifying the quality of BiH animal products in accordance with EU requirements. This is a key to foreign markets, and foreign markets are a key to turning BiH agriculture into a major employer and foreign-exchange earner. Yet political debate was not focused on setting up the SVO - it was generally viewed as a dull, technical issue.

It isn't. It's a hugely important issue that matters in people's lives.

And the SVO isn't the only body that sounds excessively technical but can in fact help deliver prosperity to BiH.

The same slowness to keep promises and deliver benefits to the people is being witnessed in regard to the BiH Phytosanitary Administration. Last week, after more than six months' delay the BiH Council of Ministers finally adopted a decision on establishing the Administration. Among other activities, this is the body that will have responsibility for establishing a system for certifying the quality and safety of BiH export crops. That means it is the body that will allow thousands of BiH farmers to turn their crops into profits, to turn their crops into exports, to turn their crops into new jobs. Setting up the Administration on paper, however, will mean nothing unless it is fully operational in practical terms. That means drafting and implementing new legislation. MOFTER has been drafting the necessary laws since April 2003 but does not yet have a text ready to send into parliamentary procedure. These laws and numerous by-laws and procedures are required by the EC and also by BiH farmers and agro-producers.

As soon as the Administration is established the CoM and MOFTER must appoint staff and provide premises and equipment.

While MOFTER has been working to draft laws, the RS Ministry for Agriculture has drafted similar laws and sent them into adoption procedure, a pointless duplication of effort, since the EC has clearly stipulated that this legislation has to be at State level. So while the right ministry has failed to draft the law, the wrong ministry has wasted time doing exactly that - a frightening example of muddle at the citizens' expense.

Just think about it. If BiH farmers could market their carrots and potatoes and tomatoes abroad they would stand an infinitely better chance of moving into profit; they would also be able to compete more effectively with vegetable farmers in neighbouring countries because they would start generating profits that could be ploughed back into BiH farms. But you can't buy BiH tomatoes in Paris, or carrots in Munich or potatoes in Copenhagen because a basic requirement for exports to the EU is making the BiH Phytosanitary Agency fully functional.

This is a huge impediment to the development of BiH agriculture.

Why have some politicians failed to complete in a timely way a fairly basic and straightforward political and administrative task - namely to establish this Agency? Well, perhaps they have failed to grasp how important this Agency is. What is clear is that they haven't thought it necessary or important to convey the significance of the Phytosanitary Agency to the general public.

The Phytosanitary Administration will help consolidate the Single Economic Space, and it will bring BiH one step closer to membership of the World Trade Organisation. It's also a Feasibility Study requirement - but that is not the most important thing about it. It's a *BiH* requirement - it's one of the keys to the future prosperity of this country and its people.

The present system, with divided jurisdictions between Entities, is inefficient and commercially unsatisfactory. While it makes it harder for BiH farmers and food processors to sell their products overseas, it makes it easier to import food products, with inadequate commercial or health and safety supervision.

This is a critical step to addressing the needs of BiH farmers and while the government stalls the process they are the ones paying a heavy price for it, and so are BiH consumers. It is imperative that the Phytosanitary Agency is operational and that relevant state level legislation is adopted by May of this year. Not because the European Commission wants it, but because the people of BiH desperately need it; not because the International Community is calling for it, but because if the political leadership of BiH is serious about improving the lives of citizens it will take steps immediately to resolve this matter..