

Interview: Wifred Martens, Chair of the Police Restructuring Commission (PRC) in BiH: “Rejecting Police Reform Would Be a Catastrophe for BiH”

I expect the RSNA to give a clear mandate to leaders of the parties to negotiate on the Police Reform Agreement based on conclusions from the PRC Report, said Martens

Member states of the European Union completed the reform of their police forces, and therefore we ask of BiH to do the same, said Wilfred Martens, PRC Chair. He added that RS authorities should not have any fears that this Entity would be abolished by police reform.

NN: The RSNA will meet on Monday to discuss police reform. What do you expect from this discussion?

MARTENS: I expect the RSNA to give a clear mandate to leaders of the parties to negotiate on the Police Reform Agreement based on conclusions from the PRC Report. This implies, as you know, competencies on the BiH level for the financing and legislation, the setting up of local police areas, and the police free of any political interference in their operation – i.e. the acceptance of European standards.

NN: What will happen if the RSNA refuses to allow its politicians to discuss police areas crossing the IEBL?

MARTENS: This would be a catastrophe for BiH. The whole region of the Western Balkans is determined to join the EU, BiH in particular. It is clear that police reform is one of the important elements for change and for EU accession. It is not the only element, but surely it is one of the most important ones. All EU member states endorsed these changes, which also include changes to their constitutions. We ask the same of BiH. The future of BiH is indeed in the EU, and hence your country has to endorse certain changes, including police reform.

NN: Why are RS politicians fearful of police reform?

MARTENS: My impression is that this is a fear of the disappearance of the RS. But, this is not true. The constitutiveness of Republika Srpska as an Entity remains. Even the Ministry of Interior will have other competencies, and not those police-related competencies. The MoI in Belgium has other competencies, and not those related to the police. There are districts, or local police areas. Police areas will cross the IEBL where necessary for functional reasons. RS politicians must accept the crossing of the IEBL. This is not a fanatically held position of the PRC. We discussed this with 18 police experts from BiH, after which we proposed five, ten and eleven police areas. Now, they need to negotiate on the acceptance of a final solution. We did not impose this. It is a result of discussion.

NN: Who were the members of PRC opposed to police areas crossing the IEBL?

MARTENS: We had a working group. From the RS, we had representatives who will, I hope, be given a mandate to negotiate on Monday. We had a number of professionals on the Commission, and I cannot place them in a political concept.

NN: How efficient and functional can the police be with competencies divided between the Minister and Police Board, and with a Director and two Assistant Directors?

MARTENS: The Police Board, which will include Entity representatives, will be organized on the level of BiH, and it is intended to provide assistance to the Ministry of Security. However, not all competencies of the Minister of Security will be transferred to this Board. The Minister of Security has 43 competencies, and the Board will have only a few. The Police will have a Director and two Assistant Directors. My position on this is that new elements in talks will not damage the integrity of the PRC Report.

NN: Why is the EU so adamant on police reform?

MARTENS: The EU is not only adamant when it comes to police reform. However, police reform is a crucial issue. Police Reform has already been completed in all EU member states. In my country Belgium we faced some difficulties in police reform. This was the case in Holland , too. This is not only about police reform, but it is of great importance.

NN: Does police reform in BiH imply changes to the Constitution?

MARTENS: A clear definition of the implementation of police reform is indeed the budget and legislation on the level of BiH. There are two ways of doing this. The first is to adopt amendments to the BiH Constitution, which is an easier, faster and simpler way. So, amendments can be adopted for the sake of providing the constitutional basis for the implementation of this reform. The longer and harder way is to change the BiH Constitution.

Downsizing of the Police

NN: How many people will lose their jobs in the process of police reform? Will this downsizing affect mainly police officers or administrative staff?

MARTENS: This will be an important segment of the implementation of police reform. Currently, I believe there are 18,000 police officers and administrative staff in BiH. I cannot say at this moment who will bear the brunt of downsizing and how many people will be laid off. However, the figure of 18,000 people is obviously high.