

Article by Stefan Feller, Head of the Police Unit in Brussels in Nezavisne novine

Police Restructuring – the European Perspective

Brussels is following the BiH Police restructuring process very closely – not just as a box that must be ticked before BiH can move on to the next state of association, but because crime on the streets of Banja Luka, Sarajevo or Mostar directly impacts crime on the streets of our capitals. While BiH's balance of trade in general may be negative, when it comes to crime the story is reversed. The region as whole is being used as a trade route for drugs, arms and people.

BiH and the EU share common values and goals. There is clearly a common interest in security, in a stable environment that guarantees a peaceful life for citizens and serves as the basis for investment that can sustain economic growth. That is why structural police reform is one of the EU's pre-conditions for opening negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The EU requires structural police reform in BiH that will rationalise the police services and that will be applied through functional areas that promote efficiency. This is not – as some unscrupulous politicians have argued – an attack on the competencies of the RS. The fact is that the police officer you see on the beat today will be the same police officer on the beat after police reform has been implemented, working from the same local police station.

BiH's fractured policing system is a major obstacle to creating and maintaining a safe and secure environment. It is the existing system that is preventing the police from fighting crime effectively. And this system has shown itself to be an easy target for political interference.

All of this means that police officers and citizens do not benefit from the present system, while criminals do.

During my time as Police Commissioner in Kosovo we conducted high profile investigations into organised crime and crime related to trafficking in narcotics and human beings. It is no secret that some of the main trafficking routes run through the Balkans and through BiH. We had some significant successes in Kosovo but often at crucial moments of an investigation we lost valuable time because we had to deal with a multiplicity of police authorities.

We had to watch criminals and drugs move more freely than the police who were trying to pursue and arrest them. It was not a lack of professionalism among the local police that hampered effective policing – it was the system.

And not only does the system not work – it costs too much. And citizens have to bear the burden of that cost. How can you justify a police system that allocates nearly 65 percent of its budget on administration? In my home country we would never be able to defend this kind of spending. Do BiH taxpayers not deserve better value for money? It's been calculated that with reform your police services could save some 140 million KM per year!

Finally; the most basic tenet of European policing is that politics must not interfere with operational policing. We at the Police Unit in Brussels note with concern that political pressure is still being exerted on the police in BiH. This must stop.

We have not heard a single professional argument by those who oppose police restructuring as to why the current system should be maintained. Why not? Because all the facts speak against them.

Police restructuring is about better policing; it's about a safer BiH; it's about a more effective and efficient fight

against crime. There is no feasible alternative to a single police structure. If we want fewer drugs on our streets we must allow the police to do their job. If we want fewer car thefts, fewer burglaries, less violence then we must introduce a modern police system that allows police officers to respond to crime swiftly and effectively. That is what can make BiH a safer place.

Its in BiH's interest, and Europe's too.

Stefan Feller was Director of Police in his native North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany and is the former UNMIK Police Commissioner. He is now the head of the Police Unit in Brussels, responsible for advising the EU on Police Policy.