Article by the Ambassador Robert Bosscher, official representative of the EU Presidency in BiH: “Your Future is in Your Hands”

Politicians in this country almost all agree that Bosnia and Herzegovina belongs in the European Union. Every one of the main parties has publicly committed itself to the process of European integration. This involves a series of clear steps. Many of these steps have already been taken. Among the most pressing and important step that must still be taken so that BiH can move forward to the next level of integration is police reform.

This has been identified by the European Commission as one of the major remaining legislative and administrative tasks that need to be accomplished before BiH can begin Stability and Association negotiations with the EU.

In May the European Commission will make an assessment on BiH’s progress. A positive appraisal could see BiH starting negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement by early fall. That will send a powerful signal to the outside world that BiH has a future in the EU.

They pave the way for jobs, justice and security for all in BiH – as the 10 new countries which joined the EU this year, including Slovenia and Hungary, know; and as Croatia is finding out.

It will help attract foreign and domestic investments. It will help pave the way for jobs and justice.

There are many overwhelming reasons why police reform is important.

It will also without any doubt deliver *real* benefits to the citizens of this country, long before BiH becomes a member of the EU.

It will make police better equipped in their fight against organized crime. It will help curb trafficking of drugs and people across BiH.

It will make BiH *safer*.

The European Commission has set out three criteria according to which police reform should be conducted. They are based on the recommendations of the Police Restructuring Commission, which brought international experts together with BiH State, Entity and Cantonal representatives under the chairmanship of the former Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens.

Firstly, all legislative and budgetary competencies must be vested at the state level. Secondly, police districts should be drawn up on professional – not political – grounds, and thirdly, steps should be taken to get damaging political interference out of day to day policing.

These steps will remove the barriers to policing that are currently posed by the Inter Entity Boundary Line and cantonal boundaries. They will speed up police response times.

They will not result in the abolition of the RS. There are no plans to abolish the RS.

The wisdom of police reform is clear, especially when you look at the existing police set-up. Just take the example of Tuzla Canton, where 2 million KM was stolen from two banks recently. The Tuzla police pursued a lead that pointed to suspects in Bijeljina, and issued warrants for their arrest. The Bijelina police have still not reacted. Just to transfer an arrest

warrant from Tuzla to Bijeljina, the Tuzla police must send the warrant to the Federation MUP, which must then transfer it to the RS MUP, which will then forward it to Bijeljina. And neither police force is legally obliged to cooperate with the other.

This complex, unwieldy and utterly unreliable procedure suits criminals.

It does not serve citizens.

It is a scandal.

It *must* be changed.

It is because of the present fractured police system that drugs are being sold in schoolyards across BiH; car thieves are having a field day, the number of home burglaries has gone through the roof.

And the cost of policing in BiH is twice the cost in Slovenia and Hungary. 9% of total budget costs go on police. The money spent on the police system in this country of course doesn't go to police officers themselves but to the bloated bureaucracy that serves them so badly.

The doors of the EU are open. They will not be open forever.

BiH *must not* let this historic opportunity go. The EU has laid out a clear path that must be followed in the coming months. BiH's political leaders must not let this chance slip by.

H.E. Robert Bosscher has been the Netherlands's Ambassador to BiH since 2001. As the Netherlands currently holds the rotating Presidency of the European Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina on behalf of Luxembourg, Ambassador Bosscher is the official representative of the EU Presidency in BiH.