

Editorial by Wilfred Martens: “Talks that Begin Today Can Clear the Way for BiH’s European Future”

The representatives of BiH’s main political parties will meet today to continue the talks that began so promisingly at Vlasica two weeks ago. If these talks succeed, then one of the handful of remaining obstacles will be removed and BiH – as early as this month! – could receive the green light to begin Stabilization and Association Agreement negotiations with the European Union. This would be a momentous step forward in this country’s progress towards full EU membership.

Now, I have always been clear about the purpose of police restructuring. It is not first and foremost about satisfying EU entry criteria. It’s about making BiH a safer place to live. It’s about putting criminals behind bars. It’s about ending the nightmare ascendancy of corruption and crime in this country. It’s about paying police throughout the country a decent wage and giving them the resources they need to do their jobs properly.

It’s about taking politics *out* of policing and putting professionalism *into* policing.

But the importance of the secondary objective – meeting the EU criteria – simply cannot be overstated.

If the talks that begin in Sarajevo today fail, then the politicians of this country will have dealt a terrible blow to the hopes – the justified hopes – of every man woman and child in BiH. They will have closed the door to Europe.

Through that door lies a future for the citizens of this country that is already being enjoyed by the citizens of Slovenia . It is a future that will deliver real and substantial benefits to citizens, in terms of standard of living, in terms of security, in terms of freedom of travel, in terms of investment in jobs and industry.

In 1994 Slovenia's GDP per inhabitant was 10,670 Euros; this figure was projected to grow to 19,090 Euros this year. This nearly doubling of the amount of real money in people's pockets can be traced directly to the reforms that go with joining the European Union and to the huge advantages in terms of trade and investment that come from full membership. Slovenian and Czech GDP per head have now overtaken that of Greece in terms of purchasing power.

In the history of EU enlargement, economies that have been relatively backward , for example those of Ireland , Greece , Spain and Portugal , have caught up fastest. Ireland went from being one of Europe's poorest countries to being one of its richest in the space of just 15 years. BiH can get on this fast track to prosperity; it can change its national reality from one of poverty, crime and political failure to one of prosperity, security and political success.

For that to happen the talks that begin in Sarajevo today must succeed.

What do the politicians have to do in order to succeed?

They need to look beyond short-term political gains. None of the politicians meeting in Sarajevo today has the right to deprive the people of BiH of the future that they desperately want and that they truly deserve – a prosperous future inside Europe.

They have to reach agreement on a police service where aall legislative and budgetary competencies are vested at State Level, where police areas are drawn up on the grounds of

functionality, and where there is no political interference in operational policing.

It's not just the European Union that wants these things, by the way – most BiH citizens do too.

The agreement they must reach will be complex but it is by no means beyond their political or administrative capacity. Now is the time for careful, sensible and disciplined negotiation. It is not the time for grandstanding.

I come from a small EU member state that has a complex and devolved system of government; I have worked for almost a year on the nuts and bolts of creating a just and efficient solution to the issue of modern European-standard policing in BiH.

I know that an agreement is possible.

I will be the first to extend the hand of appreciation and congratulations to the political leaders when they resolve remaining differences and in so doing remove a huge obstacle to BiH's European future. The people of BiH will not quickly forgive them if they fail.