

Speech by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown to RSNA

I would like to thank Speaker Stojicic for responding so positively to my request to address the RSNA.

In this speech I want to tell you where we are, what we have to do, and why we have to do it.

First, where is BiH and the RS today?

The answer is, BiH and the RS are at a historic crossroads.

The decisions you take in the next few days and weeks, will open up BiH's future; or close it down.

It's as simple – and as brutal – as that.

There are two options.

A bright future and a dark one.

BiH is a European country. Geographically, culturally and politically. Europe is your homeland. And membership of the European Union, is the only future that offers BiH prosperity, security, and stability.

You can choose this option if you want to.

But there is a black option, too.

And, you can choose that as well.

Then BiH and the RS will be the only country left behind as all the rest of the Balkans moves down the path to Europe.

And let me tell you what that means – BiH being left out and left behind;

- No new jobs
- No foreign investment;
- No foreign travel;
- No end to the haemorrhage of your youngest and your brightest and your best – who see no future here;
- No change to the heavyweight foreign presence here, whose job will be, not to help you move forward, but to prevent you moving backwards and creating instability in a region moving away from the path to Europe.

And if that's the choice you make – here in the RSNA – then you will, no doubt, be able to meet here as frequently as you like to celebrate the fact that you have perfectly resisted change and perfectly preserved the past – in a darkened cellar.

So, this is the time to choose.

It's up to you.

But if you want to join Serbia and Montenegro on the path to Europe, you have to do what they have done: meet the standards Europe sets.

And – up to now – you have.

You have already made progress – great progress over the last two years.

So, second question.

Will you lose it all now?

In May, the EU will decide on whether to allow BiH to open negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association agreement, just as Belgrade did last week.

This is the crucial step that BiH can take down the road to Europe.

And BiH – and especially the RS – has done a lot to get to this point.

I don't pretend it has been easy.

Indeed, it can be argued that these reforms have been more difficult for the RS than the Federation.

But, you in the RS have succeeded in areas where many in the International Community thought it was impossible.

- A single state-wide VAT system.
- Defence Reform.
- The HJPC.
- Above all, by turning around an atmosphere of obstruction to co-operation with The Hague.

So, you, in the RS, have played your part – a big part – in bringing the citizens of this country to the very gates of Europe.

That question again.

Will you throw away that historic opportunity on the last great reform?

For police reform is the last great reform necessary for Europe.

This is the final hurdle for the RS and BiH, to enter into the European path.

So, let me ask once more.

Do you really believe maintaining political control of your police is more important than this country's entire European future?

That is the question – the only question – the RS must now decide on.

Will you join Serbia and Montenegro on the path to Europe – or will you choose to be left behind – Bosnia , once again the black hole of the Balkans?

And let me make one thing clear. Belgrade is not going to help – they are on the road to Europe now. They are not going to look back, to rescue Banja Luka.

Commissioner Rehn in Brussels has indicated that a successful deal on police re-structuring, that adheres to the EU's principles, will result in a 'yes' from the EU in May.

That is less than 4 weeks away.

Just a few weeks to wait for a decision BiH will feel for many years – and your children will feel, probably for the rest of their lives.

Now I, and my colleagues in the EU and EUPM have spent the last two months in intensive discussions across BiH.

We have visited 25 towns, and held over 50 meetings with the police, local citizens and municipal leaders.

I have met with and debated the key issues with most of you here, in many cases more than once.

So, I think I have a pretty good idea what the main concerns here in the RS.

Let me list them.

The first is that this is all a secret plot to abolish the RS.

That is a lie.

It is a lie spread by those who want to keep police under political control. Who want, whatever the price, to hang on to a system which helps criminals escape, rather than help police catch them.

Let me repeat here on the record:

There is no hidden agenda in police reform.

There is no plot to open up, by clandestine means, the question of Constitutional Reform.

This is not an attack on the Republika Srpska.

There is no attempt to abolish the Entities.

This does not mean that the RS MuP has to be abolished.

This does not involve taking away the right of the democratically elected institutions of BiH, to oversee in the work of the police.

This does not constitute an attack on the policemen and women of BiH.

Far from it.

This is what your police need, to do their job properly. To beat the criminals, rather than be beaten by them.

- Decent pay.
- Better equipment to fight crimes
- The same pay for doing the same job.

Why should RS police get paid half what their colleagues are paid in the Federation?

And we've been speaking to citizens in the RS too.

Now, I will not pretend to know your voters better than you.

But the latest, scientifically-conducted opinion polls, conducted only in the RS, tell us an interesting story.

79 percent of RS citizens want BiH to join the EU.

A majority (51 percent) support the establishment of a State

level police service, if it means BiH gets to Europe.

A clear 59 percent of RS citizens think that criminals have more influence over politicians, than ordinary citizens.

77 percent of citizens say that police need to do more to fight crime.

And that's what the 3 EU principles are designed to do.

Make it easier to catch criminals.

Let me remind you what those principles are;

- Exclusive police competency at the BiH level, but operational control at the local level
- Police areas drawn up on the grounds of operational efficiency, not political control.
- Above all, no political interference in policing.

Now, I have heard the argument from a number of you that these conditions are not necessary.

- That Europe doesn't mean it.
- That Europe will be flexible.
- That Europe will change its standards for BiH.

This is pure and dangerous fantasy.

The EU is not begging BiH to join.

Europe will not change its rules to let BiH in. If BiH will not change itself to meet Europe's rules, BiH stays out.

It's as simple and as brutal as that.

I have also heard some say that there are no common European standards, so why should BiH have to adhere to this model? If BiH has a professional police force that can freely operate across the IEHL, why can't the police areas stay within the Entities?

Well, here is why.

There is one over-arching European standard.

This is that there should be no political interference in policing. And in BiH this means breaking the link between politics and police and replacing political interference in the police with citizens accountability of the police.

And that means operational control in local police areas which can cross the IEBL where they need to and citizens' oversight councils to hold them to account.

Now – again – let me be very blunt.

If you can't accept that, you can't adhere to European standards and you can't move through the gates to Europe.

It's as simple and as brutal as that.

Then there are those who say that we can apply the model of defence reform to police restructuring.

I am afraid we can't.

Defence reform created three structures – a state structure and two Entity structures.

Police reform, to meet the EU standards, has to create a single structure. Following the model for defence reform is not a route to success – its just another road which will lead us to failure to comply with the European Commission's standards.

And if you cannot accept this, you will not get the EU's agreement in May to start negotiations on an SAA.

It's as simple and as brutal as that.

Then there are many who say that it is not common practice in your culture to separate policing areas from judicial ones.

Well, let me tell you that it is very common, in Europe, for policing areas not to overlap exactly with prosecutorial areas. This is the case in Italy, France, Germany, UK, Ireland, Finland...

You see, the overwhelming principle here is what is efficient for police, not what's efficient for prosecutors. And how can you tell me that it is efficient for the police to have Sarajevo divided into two? Foca separated from Gorazde; Tuzla cut off from Bijelina – i tako dalje?

But here is the bottom line – this is not just about Europe . It's about what your citizens want and need.

What the citizens of BiH and the RS want is the rule of law.

But at present what they're getting, is the rule of the criminals.

At present the BiH criminals are winning – and the police are losing. The figures show that.

Your citizens know that.

And your police know why.

Because we are asking our police to fight criminals with one hand tied behind their back.

- No single computerized record of fingerprints.
- No modern forensic services.
- Non-existent DNA analysis.
- No state-level co-operation with European countries to fight organized crime.
- And a system which the criminals love because they can hide behind borders in every corner of BiH.

We have to change this.

We have no option.

If we fail, then BiH sinks further into crime and criminality,

- the criminals continue to win
- the police continue to lose
- the people continue to suffer
- and we will continue to be locked out of the only safe future BiH can have – our homeland in Europe.

So, what happens next?

Well, on Sunday night, we will start these historic negotiations in Vlasica.

One thing is important about these. The principles Europe has set us to achieve may be fixed. But how we achieve them is not. There is much to be negotiated.

So, there is much room for compromise. There is a lot the RS can win from this if it wants to.

There are great opportunities in this reform.

One of the most exciting is the creation of the Community Oversight Councils. On these will be your prosecutors, judges, mayors and representative from the local community.

RSNA members could sit on those committees if that is what you want – providing the link between this democratic elected assembly and the way police work in the local community.

And we can find a means, I am sure, to give this body, the RSNA, a real role in deciding the future police structure in BiH.

We can find, if you have a mind to do so – a role for the RS Ministry of the Interior.

There is everything to play for and much to be gained.

So, let me sum up.

In the next few weeks, when you decide on Police reform, you will decide whether you join Serbia and Montenegro on the path to Europe – or whether you and the rest of BiH remain cut out, cut off, and left behind.

The only country in the Balkans isolated from Europe.

This is your choice.

And let me warn you. It may not come again any time soon.

So, be careful how you make it – everything depends on it.