

Bosnian Serbs Quash EU Plan for United Police

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Republika Srpska veto on police reforms angers international community and blocks Bosnia's path towards EU.

Bosnia and Hercegovina's dreams of getting a green light to start talks on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, SAA, with the European Union have suffered a fresh setback after the country failed to comply with its obligations from the union's feasibility study.

The decision from the Enlargement Commissioner's directorate came on May 19, after talks on police reform collapsed between Bosnia's leading political parties.

Europe's "no" is a sign to the country's ruling nationalists that without a deal on a unified police, the country will remain a black hole on the map of the EU.

Police reform was one of the prerequisites established by an EU feasibility study before Bosnia can make progress towards European integration.

Since the end of the war in 1995, which split the country into the Federation and the Republika Srpska, RS, the two entities have run their own police forces. They are not even allowed to cross the entity borders.

The international community has complained that the structure is dysfunctional, creating opportunities for criminals who cross the entity borders with impunity.

Last year, Bosnia's politicians and the international community started looking into ways to resolve the issue and negotiations intensified as the date of the EU assessment neared.

But talks between the representatives of both entities, the ruling and opposition parties, and the international community foundered at the last minute, after the RS delegates rejected the model for reform recommended by EU officials.

This envisaged creating a united police force funded from the state budget, scrapping political controls over police work and allowing police free access to both sides of the ethnic demarcation line.

Three days before an EU delegation was due to visit the country, the RS government and the opposition united to oppose the reforms.

They said it violated the provisions of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, which "stated that each entity is in charge of its own interior ministry affairs".

The international community in Bosnia has not concealed its disappointment. "The European Union will not change its principles," the EU High Commissioner's office said in a statement, clearly aimed at the RS.

Ljiljana Radetic, spokesperson of the internationally-appointed Office of the High Representative, OHR, said, "The opposition parties and those in power [in the RS] must keep in mind that the opportunities at hand to do the right thing will not be there indefinitely."

The European police force in Bosnia voiced similar opinions. "The EUPM [the European Police Mission] hopes politicians in the Serb Republic will seriously reconsider and ... make a decision allowing reforms to take place," it said.

However, there are no clear indications that another red light from the EU may trigger a new round of sanctions against the RS from the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown.

Federation representatives called openly for the punishment of the obstructionist RS politicians. "The European Commission and the international community in Bosnia need to take appropriate measures to force those who are obstructing police reform to accept [them]," said Sefik Dzaferovic, chair of the Bosnian parliament's lower house.

"If measures are not taken, Bosnia and Hercegovina could end up as a hostage to RS for no reason and [Bosnia] must not be a hostage," he added.

The Social Democratic Party, SDP, said the collapse of the talks showed the ruling nationalists on all sides were unfit to govern. "A pro-European Bosnia is unachievable with the present political forces in power," the party said.

"Now the nationalists have shown what they can do, it is time for all progressive and patriotic forces to pull together and offer an alternative."

Slobodan Popovic, an SDP deputy in the RS parliament, said, "Those striving to keep the police within boundaries in their own country, when crime knows no boundaries, are acting against the very people they claim to represent."

In spite of the chorus of condemnation, the RS leaders appear bent on riding out the furore, strongly backed by Serb war veterans, refugee groups, displaced persons' groups and some student organisations.

Their campaign culminated with a rally in Banja Luka on May 17, when a crowd of 10,000 urged the RS authorities to stand up for the Serb entity's rights.

"Sanctions and isolation are more acceptable than reforms that act as a prelude to scrapping the RS," Savo Cvjetinovic, chair of the Bosnian Serb war veterans' union, said, before the rally.

Analysts were not surprised by the Serb politicians' reluctance. "They can only keep on ruling unchecked while they are protected by their iron-clad entities," Mirjana Kusmuk, editor of Banja Luka's *Nezavsine Novine*, told IWPR.

Tanja Topic, an analyst of the Friedrich Ebert foundation, said acceptance of the proposed police reforms would have marked a major defeat for the RS leadership. "For ten years they have claimed their entity is a state and now they are being asked to sign a document that denies that," she said.

"They are hiding behind the protesters, not because the RS is under threat but because they are clueless over the nature of the concessions that need to be made on the way to Europe."

Dragan Cavic, the RS president and leader of the ruling Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, said the only way out of the impasse was to lay the entire matter before the entity's parliament.

"It is absurd to expect the international community, least of all the European Commission, to change their positions, as they have made them loud and clear," he said.

On May 18, Cavic announced he would invoke his constitutional right to summon a special session of the RS parliament, so it could declare its opinion.

The problem with the police reform, he said, was that "it changes the Dayton Accords section defining an entity's authority in one of the most sensitive departments". He added, "It is a difficult decision for everyone to make."

Setting out both sides of the argument, he concluded, "Accepting the EU principles means altering parts of the Dayton Accords...[while] not accepting them means being deemed unfit to join the European integration process."

Ahead of the special session of parliament, the RS party leaders are locked in talks behind closed doors.

After an initial appearance of unity, there are now signs of cracks. On May 22, for example, Milorad Dodik, leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, the strongest opposition party in the RS, said there was room for more discussion about a state-wide police force.

The SDS has not altered its stance one jot, however, following a session of the party presidency on May 24.

As a result, the SDS's coalition party, the Party of Democratic Progress, PDP, led by Bosnia's foreign minister Mladen Ivanic, may hold the decisive votes at the session of the RS parliament.

Ivanic and his party colleagues have declined to comment on how they will vote. But if Dodik's party decides to swing behind the police reforms and is joined by the PDP, they could outvote the SDS.

Either way, the future of Bosnia's police reforms - and of its relations to the EU - hangs on a knife edge and few analysts are willing to speculate on what the RS parliament will finally decide on May 30.

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