

New Year's Message to the People of Bosnia & Herzegovina from Paddy Ashdown, High Representative and European Union Special Representative

"DON'T SQUANDER THE OPPORTUNITIES CREATED IN 2003"

2003 marked a turning point for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2004, we risk turning back to the past again.

Most international observers, and many in BiH itself, didn't believe we could come so far in 2003. But as a result of the reforms this year, we now enter the year ahead daring to hope that BiH can finally look to a real future within Europe and NATO.

So, the question for next year is: will 2004 be the year we build on that opportunity, or the year we lose it?

And the answer to that question lies, not with the International Community, but with BiH's politicians and what they do next.

But first our successes in 2003.

Big changes are often obscured by the sound and fury of political conflict and day-to-day events.

For years, the world has seen Bosnia and Herzegovina as a source of trouble and instability, a country dependent on outside aid and international intervention.

But today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a position, at last, to start proving the sceptics wrong.

A year ago, we were stumbling around without a government or a clear direction.

We talked a lot of reform; but we did very little of it.

That changed in 2003.

Last year, BiH proved it could reform and the World noticed. We chose Europe and NATO – and Europe and NATO responded.

The defence laws, and now the law establishing the Indirect Taxation Authority, are major achievements, as significant as any of the reforms passed by Poland, Hungary and the others as they prepared to join NATO and the European Union.

But, as was the case in these countries a decade ago, BiH still has a long and difficult road to travel. The forces of nationalism, crime and corruption in BiH are still strong. And the will to abandon the politics of the past still too weak.

Nevertheless, the direction is now clearly mapped out for us, and the destination is something everyone agrees on.

By the end of this coming year, BiH could be a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace, and Bosnian negotiators could be in Brussels negotiating this country's integration into Europe. And that's what the people of BiH want; because they know only Europe and NATO can give them the security and prosperity they seek.

The question for 2004 is not "can we do it?" We have proved that we can.

The question is rather "are BiH's politicians prepared to work hard enough and to abandon the past enough, to make it happen?"

Here, the most recent signs are not so good.

In some quarters, the pull of the past is still too strong and the commitment to Europe still too weak. Key conditions for our further progress towards the EU and NATO are now being obstructed. This could spell the end of BiH's European dream if it continues into 2004.

I cannot hide from you that I think that, after a year of success, there are very bumpy times ahead. What was done through the long months of reform in 2003, can be undone by a few weeks more of obstructionism in early 2004.

So we need to have a care.

Those who support a strong and effective state, should have a care that they do not diminish the great dream of a Bosnia and Herzegovina, whole and free making its way to Europe, and reduce that dream to the mere maintenance of a pocket Bosnia over which they retain political control.

Those who claim the protection of the Dayton Peace Agreement to preserve the competencies of their entity, should have a care not to undermine that agreement by making themselves the primary obstacles in developing the Dayton state.

Those who have so much to gain from international investment in a single strong economy, should have a care not to recreate the parallel structures of the past, which are the enemies of a single economic space and undermine the effective government upon which a strong economy depends.

Take the reform of the intelligence services for example. If some in the RS refuse to summon the will to professionalize our security services, the world will conclude that, in the global fight against terrorism, BiH is not serious and cannot be trusted. And so every citizen will be placed in greater jeopardy, a key reform for joining Europe will be lost, and any chance of visa free travel for citizens destroyed.

That's a high price to pay to preserve two rotten intelligence systems that spend more time spying on citizens than protecting them.

Meanwhile, those who have traditionally claimed to support the building of the Bosnian state, are now, it seems, acting in ways which will undermine the creation of modern independent state institutions.

We have seen this most recently over the reforms to establish, for the first time in BiH's history, an independent and effective judicial system free from political influence. If BiH won't do this, it can't join Europe. It's as simple as that. Let me be clear. I am satisfied that the work of the HJPC, although in its early stages, is proceeding as it should and confident that the final outcome will be one which reflects fully the multi ethnic nature of BiH. But if others have what they believe are legitimate concerns about this, there is a right way to express these concerns and a wrong way. The right way is through the Constitutional Court. The wrong way is through politics and populist political point scoring in the media. If BiH's political leaders cannot accept that the old days, when politicians controlled the police and the judges, are gone, then they refuse to accept Europe's standards and are putting this country's future at risk.

It is clear that as a critical part of the process of European integration, BiH will also have to create a proper state-level police force that can tackle international, inter-entity and complex organised crimes. Yet here too, narrow political interests are blocking reforms that are key to the Rule of Law, essential for Europe and in the wider interests of every citizen in BiH.

So, watch this space.

These reforms – creating a single Intelligence and Security

Agency, a single independent High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, and a strengthened State-level law-enforcement capacity (SIPA) – along with the challenge of creating a single city administration based on guaranteed power sharing in Mostar – are the key early tasks for 2004.

If we continue to fail on these, then the gate to Europe and NATO, which we managed to push open in 2003, will slam shut again in 2004.

We will of course also continue to work on economic stability and job creation, and here the focus must be on a single economy tied to regional institutions.

In 2003 we surprised the world with 10 months of real reform, then ended this year with two months of old-style obstructionism.

Can we return to reform in 2004? We will know very soon.

If we can, then opportunity remains our friend.

If we can't, then the past will once again become our enemy.

The choice between the two now lies where it must if we are to join Europe. Not with the OHR and the International Community, but with BiH's political parties.