

Speech by the High Representative Paddy Ashdown to the RS National Assembly

Mr. President. Ladies and gentlemen.

May I begin by thanking you for the opportunity to address you today.

I was sorry not to have been able to do so before the summer holidays, when my deputy, Ambassador Don Hays, came here and spoke on my behalf.

But I promised to come here in person. So, here I am.

I said when I arrived, I would like these sessions to become a regular feature of my tenure here in Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, this will, I hope, be the first of many occasions when we shall meet and talk together.

A lot will happen over the coming years – moments of shared success and, inevitably, moments of heated disagreement – but I would like to think that through it all, we will continue to talk – courteously, but frankly, openly, and face to face.

And the same should apply to our dealings with the people outside this chamber – the people we are here to serve.

That is what democracy is all about.

We owe it to the people out there, in the real world, to tell them the story straight. To speak clearly and honestly about the situation in Republika Srpska, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the wider region.

As in my own country, too much information in BiH comes to the voters in a round about way – the hint from the un-named

source, the seed of doubt planted by the journalist, the investigation announced and then denied, the carefully scripted statement from the lawyers, the plots and schemes whispered in the parliamentary corridors.

Every day the political soap opera takes a new twist or turn. And too often, it bears scant relation to what everyday life and everyday concerns.

When I go round the country, I ask people everywhere what they are most worried about.

And do you know, I get the same answer wherever I go: people are worried about jobs, about crime, about corruption. They want their politicians to address the people's issues. They want them to do the people's business, not their own.

Above all, they want a better future for themselves, and for their children, and they want to know how their leaders propose to deliver it.

That is why these elections on 5 October really do matter.

The people of the RS have a serious choice to make on October 5th. It is our duty, all of us, to explain what that choice entails, and what its consequences are.

The Choice on October 5th

Those of you who will be elected to this, and the other legislatures of Bosnia and Herzegovina, will bear a heavy responsibility. You will have to make BiH work. You will have to guide BiH, and its people, further along the road towards lasting peace, stability, prosperity and membership of the European Union. And you will, for the first time since the war, be given four years to deliver, before the voters can pass judgment again.

By that time, the fate of the people of this country and this

region will have been decided.

By 2006, either the process of reform will have put this country irreversibly on the road to stability, prosperity and membership of Europe. Or it will have ground to a halt, leaving BiH in a state of decline, overtaken by its neighbours, crippled by debt, shunned by investors, abandoned by the young, undermined by corruption and condemned to a period of seemingly unending international oversight.

This may sound alarmist. I hesitate to suggest that any country, with the grand sweep of time laid out before it, could find itself faced with anything so dramatic as a last chance.

But time is running out for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the costs of turning away from reform, of turning away from Europe, no matter how slow and frustrating that process may sometimes be, are extraordinarily high.

Is this a new thought? No. It is an old one.

Listen to Ivo Andric writing in *Travnicka Hronika*:

“You can see that the people of Bosnia are divided into three or even four faiths and in bloody conflict with each other and all of them separated from Europe – that is, from the world and life, by an impassable wall...There is no doubt that one day your country will join the European community, but it could happen that it joins it divided and burdened with inherited ideas, habits and instincts which you won't find anywhere else any more. And like ghosts they will hinder its normal development and create of it an outdated monster which would be prey to everyone. And these people do not deserve that”.

So my message to the people of Republika Srpska could not be simpler:

First, make sure you vote, because your vote can make a

difference.

And second, think long and hard about how you cast your vote.

Of course, you can vote against reform, against Europe if you really want to.

You can vote to maintain the status quo and condemn this country to stagnation

That's your right as a voter.

But think long and hard before turning your face against the process of reform.

It is true that reform takes time – it is hard, and for some it is painful. It can only come if we are prepared to look to the future, rather than being obsessed by the past. And it's true that the benefits of reform – to ordinary people, in their everyday lives – have so far been conspicuous mainly by their absence.

But you don't need to look very far around this region, or around the rest of Europe, to see that reform does pay, and will pay, if we have the courage to make Bosnia-Herzegovina work, stick to our course, and to see it through.

Look at Slovenia, where the average wage now stands at over 1,300 KM per month and unemployment hovers around 6%.

Look at Hungary, where exports tripled between 1990 and 2001, rising from 11 million dollars to 32 million dollars.

And Croatia, where GDP per head has doubled in the last ten years.

There is no reason why Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot catch up with its neighbours, if we are determined to do so.

And in the longer term, there is no reason why we cannot have the cleanest political space in the Balkans – why we cannot

become the most business friendly country in the Balkans, or why we cannot have the most trusted legal system in the region.

You may think this sounds fanciful. I agree, it's ambitious. But we have no alternative but to be ambitious. And it can be done, if we work to make it happen

The only thing that stands between us, and a better tomorrow, is the resolve to create it.

BiH cannot change its past. But you can shape your future.

So I urge voters to press your politicians to answer three key questions on each of the big issues.

Why?

How?

When?

Ask politicians why living standards in the RS aren't higher, what they intend to do about it, and when?

Ask them why it is so difficult to do business in BiH, why foreign companies report it is more difficult to trade between the Entities than with faraway countries, and what they will do to change that.

How will they create a functioning economy in BiH, so that investors will bring their money here and so that businessmen in the RS can trade freely, make a profit and create more jobs.

Ask them why there is no rule of law in this country, and what they will do to establish it. How will they take on the high-level, organised criminal networks, clean up the customs administration and beat economic crime, reform the police and court systems, and enforce the highest possible standards in

public life?

Ask them what they will do to make this country work, to make its government serve the people and to equip Bosnia and Herzegovina for entry into the EU.

These are big questions. They deserve answers.

Don't settle for anything less.

Of course, there will be those who don't want to talk about these issues.

They will use every trick in the book to talk about other things, to distract you from the issues that really matter at this election.

We have seen some of that over the last few days. My advice to the voters here in the RS, and in BiH is simple.

There will be those who want to raise the hoary old ghosts of the past to frighten you into the ballot box. Ignore them. The past is not coming back. It's the future you must be worried about – and that's about jobs and justice, not nationalism and nationalistic dreams.

There will be those who want to pretend the past can be the future. It can't, and those who pretend otherwise obstruct the pathway to Europe.

Ignore them. Don't respond to the provocation; don't play their game. It's your future and that of your children you should worry about – and that's about jobs and justice, and nothing else.

And there will be those who will claim that your ethnic community – your national identity – is under threat, and even that the very existence of Republika Srpska is at risk.

IT IS NOT. You wouldn't allow it to be and I won't either.

I said on the day I arrived *"I will never permit any constitutional change that fundamentally threatens the identity or security of any of Bosnia and Herzegovina's constituent people"*.

And I stand by that.

I said that *"our task is not to submerge or destroy ethnic identities"* but to *"build a state that protects those identities, celebrates them and harnesses them for everyone's benefit."*

And that remains our task.

And I said when I arrived, that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we will *"succeed together or we will fail together"*.

That is still the choice we face

So I say to the voters, when you are told to vote as Serbs or Bosniaks or Croats, ask yourself a few simple questions:

Ask yourself why you can't also vote as an individual – as a doctor, a teacher, a factory worker or a student.

Ask yourself why you can't vote as a family member – as a parent, a grandparent, a son or a daughter.

Ask why your ethnicity should be the sole, or even the primary, factor that determines the way you cast your ballot, when you are also a citizen of Europe, of the Balkans, of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of your local community?

You see, there is too much that needs to be done, too much that needs to change, to conduct our politics purely along ethnic lines.

Let people say of the 5th October 2002 that this was the day the people voted for themselves, for their families and for their children's future. When hope triumphed over fear. When the Bosnia and Herzegovina took a decisive step towards

stability, prosperity and its European destiny.