

Time Running Out for SEE Countries to Join EU

Bosnia and Herzegovina's tradition of cultural coexistence – particularly impressive when set against centuries of nearly continuous internecine warfare in Western Europe – offers a compelling lesson for the post-9/11 world, the High Representative and European Union Special Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said today, in the course of a lecture at the Centre of Islamic Studies in Oxford.

Noting that, “we in Western Europe have seen more wars – and incalculably more deaths from war – in the last five hundred years than have the countries of the Balkans,” the High Representative argued that Bosnia and Herzegovina's tradition of tolerance and coexistence refutes the idea that Islamic and Christian civilizations cannot coexist.

“The two live side by side in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing the Islamic world with real experience of modern Europe, and providing Europe with a much-needed insight into the gentle, tolerant, civilized and civilizing values which are the true reality of Islam,” the High Representative said.

Just as BiH – notwithstanding the outbreak of nationalist chauvinism in the last decade – can point the way towards harmony between civilisations, so the post World War Two experience of countries in the EU offers a compelling model for BiH. Those countries have made war among themselves unthinkable, the High Representative said, “because the values they share – an unshakeable attachment to democracy, to an open and plural society, to the rule of law, and to freedom in economic life – are far stronger than anything that divides them.”

The Central European transition countries have demonstrated

that they can emulate this historical progression. "If the countries of the Balkans can follow in the footsteps of the ten new Member States – then the democratization and economic liberalization of the continent will be complete, and this European continent of ours will be genuinely whole and genuinely free," he said.

But the window of opportunity is rapidly closing. "If I have a worry – it is not the Balkans desire to get to Europe ," the High Representative said. "It is Europe 's willingness to keep the door open long enough to let them do it. I fear that Europe 's doors are closing – that protecting what we already have will soon be seen as more important than proselytising for what could be.

"I hope, at the very least, that Europe will recognize that even within its present borders it cannot be complete with a black hole in the Balkans, an unwanted enclave trapped in its Southeastern corner. That would be to abandon what has succeeded so spectacularly across Central and Eastern Europe – namely, the prospect of joining the Union, with all it brings in terms of living standards and freedom of travel."

But this can only be achieved if reforms are carried out. "And I hope my friends in the Balkans will realize that they must hurry – time is not on their side."