Article by Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: “From Dayton To Brussels”

I am not much of a person for looking back. But sometimes it’s worth a glance behind you in order to decide what still needs to be done ahead.

Anniversaries are a good time for such reflection. On the 27th of this month I will have been High Representative for two years.

When I think about my time here, I always come back to the same question: what have we and our BiH partners done in the last two years to give the citizens of this country a better future?

The sound and fury of daily politics, the abstraction of complex technical reforms: these often obscure the real reason why the International Community is here. Yet our task today is the same as in 1995: to prevent the horror of the early 1990s ever befalling this country again, to deal with its terrible consequences, and to ensure this country is placed irreversibly on the path of becoming a viable European state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina had already made great strides from war to sustainable peace by the time I arrived here in 2002. The roadblocks a distant memory, freedom of movement restored. A stable currency, something most Balkan countries do not enjoy. A political system based on free and fair elections. And most remarkably of all, a million or so refugees returning to their homes, often many years after they were driven from them.

But nobody doubted that the country had many challenges still

to face on its road to irreversible peace and stability. The economy was stagnant, generating neither jobs nor investment. Public services as a result were still declining from standards achieved back in the 1980s. An unreformed judiciary, at best grossly inefficient, at worst corrupt and ethnically partial. A government of BiH had neither the authority nor the resources to fulfill the basic duties of a modern European state. Criminal and paramilitary gangs that had underpinned the ethnic war machines still present, and controlling everything from corrupt politicians, to organised crime.

Politics was still dominated by post-conflict issues. Economic and social issues were still far down most politicians' agendas. While other former socialist countries like Hungary and even Bulgaria were pushing through the painful reforms that would transform their countries and in due course create jobs and attract investment, BiH was still unable even to agree what sort of state it was, or even whether it was a state at all.

In short, BiH lacked even the most basic political consensus about where its future lay. And without that consensus, it was impossible for BiH's politicians to come together to discuss how to get there. Instead, the international community was filling the gap, pursuing reforms that in and of themselves usually made sense, but did not really add up to a strategy, or to a project that commanded the support of the majority of the population.

Has anything changed since then?

Well, the economy is still failing to deliver jobs, prosperity, and the revenues necessary to improve public services, but at least economic reform is now underway. Ethnic parties, rather than civic parties, still dominate the political scene and the jury is still out about whether they intend to translate their new rhetoric into sustained

reform. Organised crime still has a strong hold on the political and economic life of the country, but some of the top godfathers of crime and corruption are now, at last, having to face justice.

The green shoots of change are visible.

BiH now has a State Court, and State Prosecutors, prepared to tackle even the most dangerous and politically well-connected criminals. It has indicted a former President, who is now detained awaiting trial. And it has tried and convicted the most serious case of human trafficking ever to come to court in the former Yugoslavia. More widely, the age-old links between politicians and the judiciary are being broken, one by one, starting with the removal of political immunity in 2003. Supported by the EU Police Mission, the police in BiH are increasingly becoming part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Economically, the pre-requisites for new jobs and new investment are finally being put in place. The barriers to trade within BiH, and between BiH and its neighours, are being taken down, though still too slowly. The ITA reforms are unifying BiH's customs system and replacing the inefficient sales tax system with VAT. Double taxation is being eliminated. Public procurement procedures are being cleaned up. The petty and contradictory web of business regulations are being bulldozed away. These are all technical and complex reforms that do not in themselves create employment – but lay the foundation for new jobs and future economic prosperity.

The government of BiH too is at last assuming the responsibilities of a modern European state. Reforms to the Council of Ministers have strengthened the role of the prime minister and increased the number of state ministries. Defence reforms have moved the civilian control of the armed forces to the state level, creating a state defence ministry for the first time. Security reforms underway have created a single

state intelligence service under the country's Parliament and will create an executive police force at the state level.

Bosnia and Herzegovina will always be a decentralized state. But the outlines of a viable federal system are at last emerging, although there is a long way to go yet.

Underpinning all this is perhaps the greatest change of all: the translation of a widely held but vague political desire to join Europe and NATO, into a practical programme of reform which will take us there.

One thing unites all the citizens of BiH, whatever their nationality: a yearning for the prosperity and security summed up by the word "Europe". But until recently, this had never had a significant impact upon BiH's politics. The European Commission's Feasibility Study and the real possibility of membership of NATO's Partnership for Peace has changed that. Building on a process that began with application to the Council of Europe, BiH now has a strategy for the future, an agreed destination.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of that change. Each reform now has a wider significance as part of an overall goal. That has injected new focus and discipline not only to the work of the BiH authorities, but to that of the international community as well. We have a common blueprint. The BiH authorities have more incentive to take the difficult political decisions necessary to transform this country into a viable state. And along with the OHR's Mission Implementation Plan, the international community now has a strategy for transforming its role. For replacing the push of Dayton with the pull of Brussels as the basis for our engagement in BiH.

Citizens can be forgiven for thinking that little in their lives has really changed yet. And there is clearly a way to go before reform in BiH is self-sustaining. But the prospects for

BiH becoming a prosperous and stable European state are now better than at any time in its post-war history.

How long it takes now depends, not on the International Community, but on the politicians and people of BiH.