

# Remarks by Principal Deputy High Representative Donald Hays At a Council of Europe Conference on Local Self-Governance

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On Tuesday I had the opportunity to address a meeting of mayors and local government experts, organized by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation; yesterday I was in Vitez, to meet with mayors from Central Bosnia Canton, and today it is my very great pleasure to take part in this Council of Europe conference on local self-governance.

This focus on the future of local self-government is a direct result of the actions taken by the Federation Parliament to approve the necessary amendment to the constitution and pass the implementing law that allows for the direct election of mayors this year. It is clear from the dialogue with the mayors that there is a growing focus on the potential of municipal government to change the political landscape of BiH for the better.

Significantly, the parliament's decision to introduce direct elections for mayors in the Federation reflected very broad popular support – surveys showed 80 percent or more of citizens actively in favour of this move.

Citizens are right to see this change as one way to improve municipal government – the tier of government that affects their lives directly – and of correcting the order of precedence that routinely prevails in BiH politics.

In any organization those at the top of the pyramid will wish to control the agenda unless they are forced to account to their stockholders. This is just as true of a major blue-chip corporation as it is of the political system here in BiH. Unfortunately the stockholders and the citizens frequently share the same fate, they are kept in the dark and asked to pay the bill.

The municipalities have traditionally fit into this picture as the arm of the political establishment at the bottom of the political system. However, more and more they are coming to reflect – in the face of chronic shortages of funds and resources – the daily struggle of citizens to make the system work. More often than not, the progressive municipalities have to operate in the face of indifference or outright *opposition* from at least some of the main political parties.

Now, let me make one thing very clear. In my travels crisscrossing this country in the course of the last 18 months meeting and listening to mayors and citizens, they have made it very plain – the current system fails to deliver to their fellow citizens. I can assure you that I have sided with those mayors who are doing an admirable job, despite the unequal challenges and obstacles they face, to make things better for the people in their communities.

Of course not all mayors are pillars of excellence – there are those, in every system, who don't get it or can't get it. There are mayors who are put there to hold a space or block reforms for one reason or another. This happens the world over. There are, though, men and women leading municipalities in BiH with whom it is a pleasure to work – who show vision, commitment, integrity and flair and whose communities benefit as a result.

I see a number of them in this room today.

What we want to do is give the forward-looking mayors the

tools they need so that they can expand their efforts. What we also want to do is see more of these people in office – and that, we hope will be one of the positive results of the 2 October elections.

Not all progressive mayors come from one party, one age group or one part of the country – but, as I mentioned in Vitez yesterday, the political parties would surely be moving in the right direction if they took advantage of the October polls to introduce new faces with progressive ideas. The municipal tier of government lends itself to dynamic leadership. Whereas a politician under 35 may not be seen as sufficiently experienced for State or Entity positions, he or she can really make a difference in the municipality. Mayors can get things done, and young, energetic mayors do not lack credibility on account of their relative youth.

Some might argue that I am placing too much stock in the capacity of mayors and municipal officials to change the nature of politics in BiH – even young mayors, even energetic municipal officials.

I don't believe I am.

This is the tier of government where politics and the people's interests intersect most critically – in the daily lives of each citizen, more so than the Cantons or the Entities. It is the optimal place to start

French President Charles De Gaulle famously remarked that “I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.” Well, municipal politics are where the people can start to take back the government. We can't make this country work until we unharness its potential. In order to do this we have to put the citizens first and allow them into the decision-making process.

Thank you