

Article by the High Representative Paddy Ashdown: “We want to achieve legislation stamped “Made in Bosnia”

It is three months since the fall of the Saddam regime, and every day brings fresh evidence of the enormous difficulties involved in building peace.

The international community is not new to ‘nation-building’.

In Bosnia, we have been at it for a long time. It is nearly eight years since the guns fell silent. But we are still very heavily engaged – slowly, steadily helping the democratically elected authorities repair the damage wrought by the war.

Bosnia in 2003 is almost unrecognisable to the country that emerged from the horror of war. Come to Sarajevo today, and you will find a bustling city, with supermarkets and DIY stores. Nearly a million refugees have returned to their homes. Bosnia has one of the most stable currencies in the Balkans. Freedom of movement is now taken for granted, following the imposition by one of my predecessors of a car license plate system guaranteeing ethnic anonymity – a change opposed by many of the politicians in power at the time, but widely applauded by the public.

So, out of the gaze of the world’s media, things have been getting better.

What should all this mean for the role of the international community here, nearly a decade since the war? Is it time for us to scale back our involvement, and, in particular, to relinquish some of the powers that we exercise?

These are fair questions. One of the biggest conundrums facing any international mission is how to drive forward peace implementation as rapidly as possible, but in a way that lasts, and without retarding local democratic development. We face these problems in Bosnia today; and no doubt we will face them in Iraq tomorrow.

Every situation is different, of course. Today, Bosnia is setting its sights on membership of the European Union and NATO. So, there are those who argue that Bosnia’s problems now look increasingly like those of transitional countries, Poland or Hungary for example, and that Bosnia should be left to handle them itself. They compare the international community’s powers in Bosnia to those of a dictator or a colonial governor, and argue that they have no place in a modern, democratic Europe.

As a Liberal politician, I understand those arguments. Bosnia is in much better condition than it was eight years ago. But dangers remain. Ask Bosnians if they want the international community to leave and the vast majority say not yet. This country still suffers from a dysfunctional political system, weak institutions and the enduring threat of crime and corruption. These problems are being tackled, but they are not yet beaten. The job is nearing completion, but it is not yet done. To scale back our involvement too quickly, before peace has been fully secured, would, frankly, be to gamble with this country’s – and this region’s – future.

The international community is rightly blamed for failing to act decisively to end the war here. But it has earned grudging respect for demonstrating greater resolve in implementing the peace, and for the resources it has devoted – and is continuing to devote – to the task.

None of which means that there should not be a proper debate about the powers of the international community in Bosnia, or about how the transition from powerful international oversight to genuine local self-government should be carried out.

It is true that the High Representative in Bosnia has the power to impose or revoke laws and to remove obstructionist politicians. But it is not true that he is not accountable for this. The High Representative’s authority comes from the Peace Implementation Council – made up of the 50 countries responsible for overseeing the Dayton Peace Agreement, including Bosnia and Herzegovina itself. His decisions are subject to international oversight, and to the scrutiny of the Constitutional Court of BiH and, ultimately, Bosnia being a member of the Council of Europe, of the European Court of Human Rights itself. But ultimately, the strongest check and balance of all is the people of Bosnia, on whose consent international authority ultimately depends. Opinion polls consistently show that Bosnians support these powers and think they are used not too much, but if anything too little.

That is not to say that our presence here should be prolonged any longer than is necessary. My job is to get rid of my job. Which is why when I arrived just over a year ago, I drew up a Mission Implementation Plan, setting out the tasks that need to be completed before we can safely give up the intrusive executive powers vested in my office, and transition into a more normal, European Mission, supporting Bosnia on the next stage of her journey towards EU membership. We are already paving the way for that transition. Our numbers are dropping and so is our budget. We have launched an aggressive programme to get Bosnians into key positions within the Mission.

Furthermore, my office is increasingly using its powers under Dayton not to impose legislation, but to help the local authorities reach agreement. For instance, we have established policy Commissions, made up almost entirely of local politicians and experts, to reform Bosnia's fragmented tax system, military structures and intelligence sector. The legislation drafted in these Commissions – stamped 'Made In Bosnia' – has already started to go through Bosnia's parliaments. By contrast, the number of pieces of legislation that have been imposed, and the number of officials removed from office, has dropped significantly in recent months, a trend I am determined should continue.

The fact that we are now approaching the day when the international community can relinquish its powers in Bosnia bears testimony to how far we have come in recent years. But, that progress has only been possible because we have had the power to clear problems and open up solutions. Our task now is to work, with our friends in Bosnia, to finish those tasks that must be completed to secure peace, and to set this country on the road to Europe as a fully independent, modern democracy.