

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: "Corruption and crime are the worst legacy"

This week I am in Belgrade, attending the Inter-Balkan Cooperation summit. One of the topics that I will be discussing while I am there will be the urgent need to develop an effective regional response to the problem of organised crime.

Last year some thought I was wrong when I said that the biggest security threat to BiH comes not from nationalism but from organized crime. Endemic corruption and organised crime are the terrible legacy of the collapse of law and order in former Yugoslavia at the beginning of the last decade. Corruption has degraded the courts, the governments, the bureaucracy, the police. Organised crime mushroomed during and immediately after the war, often wrapped in the flag of nationalism or patriotism, and has thrived ever since. Few areas of life have remained unscathed. The mismanagement uncovered by the recent Elektroprivreda audits made it crystal clear that corruption is not a victimless crime. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been lost to the public purse – money that could have been ploughed back into job creation and welfare services. The same applies to the more than one billion KM estimated to be lost every year in BiH as a result of sales-tax evasion and customs fraud.

But this is not just a Bosnian problem. Organised crime is a curse that affects other countries in the region, as Prime Minister Djindjic's assassination so tragically testifies. The Balkans serves as the major European corridor for trafficking in people, in weapons, in narcotics. Many of the

countries of this part of Europe are plagued by tax evasion, and are struggling desperately to free themselves from a culture in which even routine transactions are customarily accompanied by bribes. In BiH, as in Serbia and other countries in the region, organised crime permeates the nation's political and social culture. It affects everyone. It affects the hard-working citizen, the law-abiding citizen. It damages lives regardless of class or ethnicity or politics.

Attending Zoran Djindjic's funeral I was moved by the dignity displayed by the late Serbian leader's widow and family and ordinary people of Serbia and I was impressed by the determination of a beleaguered government to turn the tide and tackle the network of killers who engineered the prime minister's murder. That murder was an appalling illustration of how criminal groups can undermine democracy as a whole. The gunman who killed Zoran Djindjic, in broad daylight outside his office, was the lethal point of a conspiracy that stretched deep into Serbian politics and society. In Serbia, the government has resolved to reclaim national life from the criminals who have threatened to hijack it.

In BiH a similar process is underway – it is a long haul, it is difficult, it requires determination and political will; it demands much of those honest politicians, judges, police officers and public officials who are in the frontline of the battle against criminals who will use any means to hold on to their wealth and power. But I know that BiH society is going to be decriminalised. I know that good is going to prevail because I know the people of this country to be decent. The criminals who have stolen and murdered and extorted and bribed with relative impunity for a decade are not representative of BiH; they are parasites. Like all parasites they can be rejected. And they will be.

As each country in the region tackles the problem, it makes the work of crime fighters in neighbouring countries easier. Public officials are taking the initiative away from public

enemies. Organised crime-fighting is getting the better of organised crime. Crime and corruption are a regional problem and this problem will respond to regional solutions. BiH has just taken over the chairmanship of the Southeast European Cooperative Process, which it will hold for one year. Not only is this country part of the process, it is now a leading partner in the process – we must develop regional initiatives to tackle regional problems and we must develop a regional relationship with the rest of the world, not least with the European Union. We will do this in a whole host of areas related to social, economic and political progress, and we will do that – successfully I believe – in the fight against crime and corruption.