

# **Speech by the High Representative for the Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown for the 120th Anniversary of the Rijaset**

Honorable Reisu-l-ulema Mustafa effendija Cerić

Members of the Rijaset,

Monsignor Cardinal Puljić,

Members of the Clergy of other faiths,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, can I extend warm congratulations to you, Reisu-l-ulema, and all followers of Islam throughout the country on the auspicious occasion of the 120th Anniversary of Establishment of the Reisu-l-ulema institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is with much respect for this event which is so closely interwoven with this land's historical path that I accepted your kind invitation to speak here to-night.

The establishment of the Rijaset, 120 years ago, was an important landmark in the long and rich history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, notwithstanding the fact that Emperor Franz Josef's decree of December of 1882, appointing Sarajevo Mufti, Mustafa Hilmi effendija Hadziomerović, as the first Reisu-l-ulema of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was not uncontroversial at the time (it's good to know that even so long ago, impositions were not universally welcomed !).

That decree, however, by establishing the Rijaset, contributed to the strengthening of Bosniacs' identity and to the strength and richness of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

By it, of course, the Islamic community acquired its own highest spiritual and administrative body, entrusted with organizing religious activities and religious education.

And very soon after it the Reisu-l-ulema became a broadly elected spiritual leader, not chosen by some narrow group, but by a system of democracy, so providing a fine early example of the great task which we are still working on today, the strengthening of the broad based multi ethnic and multi religious democracy upon which peaceful rule is founded in this country.

As years went by, the Rijaset proved itself to be an authoritative voice in Islamic religious life and a valuable vehicle for the expression of the Islamic community's views and place in a multi-cultural and mutually tolerant society. These qualities have always been the special trademark of Bosnia and Herzegovina, until, of course the tragedy which befell this country in the last years of the last century.

Today Bosnia and Herzegovina is beginning, painfully to re-establish its heritage of tolerance, common living, religious freedom and basic human rights. And I am greatly encouraged that, by this gathering, we make a call to revive this heritage and that call goes to all the people of this country, from the spiritual leaders of all its faiths, gathered here tonight.

Reisu-l-ulema Cerić spoke most eloquently on precisely this subject on the eve of the recent Bajram festivities following the holy month of Rhamathan and, in these words, I am proud to be able to echo his call tonight.

I especially want to join him in that sentiment by emphasising the vital importance of the constructive work of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently under his chairmanship.

One example of this constructive partnership among different confessions has been the joint project to restore,

repair and preserve religious sites and objects of special significance to each of the four main confessions – Muslim, Christian Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish.

But it is not just in buildings that this work is shown. It would be no overstatement to describe as a major achievement, the very productive joint effort of all our religious communities in elaborating of the, as yet unenacted, draft Law on Freedom of Religion and Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And it's also hard to exaggerate the symbolic and real importance of the signatures of all the four members of the Inter-Religious Council, under a letter to the BiH Presidency, calling for the passing this law as soon as possible. I hope that this will comprise one of the new State Parliament's first acts.

This legislation will, when it is on statute books, ensure genuine religious freedoms and regulate relations between religion and state on the basis of modern democratic principles, foremost among them, the separation of Church and State.

Only in such conditions can religion remain true to its essence and to its purpose: to serve God and man.

Religion is genuinely free when it is not politicized; when it is not turned into a tool of politics.

Permit me to briefly add one more thing directly related to my mission as the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is to see to it that the Dayton Peace Agreement is strictly and fully implemented.

A prominent place in the Dayton structure of peace, reconciliation, economic, social and cultural revival, belongs to Annex 8 of the Agreement, covering the subject of preservation of national monuments.

This is of a great political and symbolic significance in terms of redressing results of the wholesale destruction of our recent fratricidal war, in which, regrettably, religious and cultural sites were often primary targets.

Strict observance of all the provisions of Annex 8 remains one of our priority tasks in the day-to-day business of restoring, reconstructing and reforming Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since I am mentioning reforms, I am tempted to comment on the need for resolute and speedy reforms in other areas in BiH as well.

However, to-night I shall confine myself asking you all, the religious leadership of the Islamic community as well as religious leaders of other communities, to join the Reias in giving your vigorous support to these vital reforms which are so necessary to guarantee a better future for the ordinary people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whom we all serve.

In conclusion, let me to once more congratulate the Islamic community upon the jubilee of the Reis U Ulema institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina and express my wishes for the well-being, prosperity and peace of the Rijaset and all the people, of all the faiths of this country.

Thank you.