Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: “Bosnia wants change not nationalism”

The results of the general election last weekend in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been described as a swing back to nationalism – a vote for the parties that fought the Bosnia war. This makes good headlines at a time when the Balkans are finding it hard to make the news – but it is wrong.

The result was a protest vote – or perhaps, given the low turn-out, a protest non-vote – against the reformist parties that have been in government during the past two years. It was not a vote for a return to the nationalism of 10 years ago.

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First, the situation today is completely different. Gone is the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army. Gone are the paramilitary groups. Gone are Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, who led Serbia and Croatia into war. Gone are the old party-controlled hate media. And even the nationalist movements that led the conflict have changed. They know as well as anyone that, seven years after the war, people want prosperity and normalcy, not conflict.

Second, two of the three old nationalist parties saw their share of the vote decline in these elections. And when the final results are in, I believe the overall votes cast for all three of these parties will have dropped compared with the last election. So, hardly a surge of support for nationalism.

Third, few reformist governments in eastern European countries are re-elected after a first term. Bosnia is, of course, unique because of its recent past. But the crucial difference is not to do with the war. It is that Bosnia's last government was voted out not for reforming too much but for reforming too little.

Fourth, anyone who travelled the length and breadth of the country before the elections, as I did, and thinks that the mood of the country is sliding back towards nationalism simply has not been listening. I came across people who were frustrated with the way things were. When the average salary is Ł100 a month, yet the Customs administration loses Ł200m a year through fraud, who can blame them? Their concerns are the concerns of people everywhere: jobs, the criminal justice system, hospitals and schools. National issues have little or nothing to do with it.

My fifth point is that the parties most involved in the last government lost the most votes. The closer they were to the centre of government, the more votes they lost. The party that saw its vote increase the most in these elections was a non-nationalist opposition party.

Last, the issue that dominated this election campaign was not nationalism, division or demands for secession. It was reform. And this was reflected in the parties' messages. All of them, including the old nationalist parties, talked almost exclusively about how to provide jobs, tackle corruption and fight crime. It was the first election since the war not to be dominated by a big national question.

That is why I do not believe Saturday's vote was a vote for nationalism. It was instead a vote for faster reform, for real change, for more progress. Ask any Bosnian the question: was the last government punished for changing too much, or for changing too little? – and the answer you get could not be clearer. The voters sent an unequivocal message to the

politicians: stop messing about and get on with changing the country. That is what the parties have promised. Now it is time to do it.

I believe the role of the international community in this process should be to spell out clearly the sort of changes this country needs if it is to attract foreign investment and one day meet the standards for European Union membership. These include: creating a stable and effective form of cabinet government; putting into place a proper revenue stream to wean the Bosnian state off international subsidies; reforming the political system to tackle corruption; and building trust in the legal system.

These are only proposals. But they will be the test by which we measure the next government's commitment to transform Bosnia for the better. The formation of the next government should not be about individuals and parties but about programmes and actions. The old nationalist parties will have to work long and hard to demonstrate that they really have changed and are at last prepared to work in the interests of all citizens. Bosnia has no choice but to modernise. That is why I believe the next government must be a reformist one.

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