

The High Representative Paddy Ashdown Television Address to the Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Good evening.

I want to tell you this evening what I believe we can achieve together because you have a right to know what to expect from me. I am your servant, quite as much as I am the servant of the international community.

In the last three days, I've traveled to every corner of Bosnia and Herzegovina and met people from all its communities.

My first impression is how much you have already achieved.

In many ways the transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been miraculous, since I first came here, almost exactly ten years ago. The raping and killing have stopped. There is freedom of movement for all. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned to their homes. Hyperinflation has been replaced by stable prices. And some new businesses are beginning to create jobs against the odds.

You have come a long way from war towards peace.

But we are still a long, long way from being a modern European country.

There is a lot still to do. And time is not on Bosnia's side.

Our economy is still too dependent on foreign assistance.

Our political system is still a mess.

Crime and corruption are commonplace.

The rich and the well connected too often escape the law.

And BiH's bloated bureaucracies and layers of regulations deter the investment and enterprise this country so desperately needs.

No wonder some of those students I met in the last few days would rather take their chances abroad than stay here.

We have to speed up the pace of reform if Bosnia and Herzegovina is not to be left behind.

Whether we do that – and how – depends not on me, but on you.

People have told me over the last few days that what they want is what people everywhere want:

The rule of law to protect them.

A good job and opportunities for their children.

Decent education, health care and pensions.

Those will be my priorities, too.

First justice, then jobs, through reform.

Prvo zakonitost. Zatim zaposlenost. Kroz reformu.

Zakonitost, because your security, jobs and democracy depend on it.

Zaposlenost, because they are the route to self-respect and a decent future for Bosnia's children.

And reform, because no change means no future. If we stay as we are we will fail.

Reform means making our judiciary and police clean and independent.

It means turning an old-fashioned failed state-run economy into one that can provide jobs in the modern world.

And it means developing the talents of the Bosnian people so you can get jobs and govern yourselves.

Now, I'm not going to pretend it will be either quick or easy. Reform will be tough.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's debts are mounting and international aid is declining. Things for some may have to get worse before they get better for all.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing a fork in the road.

One path leads back to division and the politics of ethnic conflict. It is the road to a Bosnian Ghetto. A country shunned by investors in which the international community seeks not to build, but simply to contain instability. Isolated and alone, not integrated into Europe.

The other road leads to a mature democracy where there's no need for people like me. It is the road of reform, paving the way to investment and a new future for the children of BiH. It is the road to integration into Europe.

In October, there will be elections throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, and let me remind you that the deadline to register is June 18th – less than three weeks away. If you don't register, you can't vote.

It is not my job to interfere in elections.

But it is my job to promote democracy.

So I will only say two things to you.

First – please vote. Because every vote is a building block for BiH's future. Not voting risks leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina trapped in the past.

Second, I urge you to vote for hope not for fear. Vote for the future, not the past. Vote for reform, not for more of the same. Because, unless this country reforms, you will be condemning your children to poverty or emigration.

Unless BiH can discover the courage to change, and the humanity to overcome its hate, you cannot have a future for your children. It is as simple as that.

So, here is my aim. To work with you to put Bosnia and Herzegovina onto the path to statehood and on its way to Europe.

A country which fights crime and corruption. A place where hard work and talent are rewarded. A land where the young can build their lives rather than flee abroad.

Let me repeat: this will neither be quick nor easy.

I do not say there will be jobs and riches tomorrow.

I cannot even promise not to make mistakes myself.

But I can promise you this:

That I will work day and night with you to give this country a new opportunity; and against the criminals and opportunists who have destroyed a decade of your lives.

If I didn't believe we could succeed I wouldn't have accepted this job.

This is a country of great beauty. It is as rich in talent and potential as any in Europe.

I believe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I believe in you. But what really matters is that you believe in yourselves.

Because if you do, I promise you, no matter how long it takes, you will succeed.