

Article by Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: “Vote to Make Things Better”

The elections, now just a little over a week away, are an important part of living in a democracy. However, some polls suggest that the turnout in these elections is likely to be low. This is understandable – a lot of people are absolutely fed up with politics and politicians – but that doesn't make it right. People in this country *want* reform, and they want what reform will deliver a European future; investment; a safe future; freedom to travel.

And the good news is, Europe wants the Balkans, too. So that European dream can come true, if politicians start to serve citizens better and if citizens start to hold their political representatives accountable.

Accountability is what elections are about. Local elections focus heavily on bread-and-butter issues – they are about choosing people who can find ways of making things happen.

Elections are not about politicians but about the people – they are the weapons citizens have to get rid of poor performers and replace them with people they believe can get the job done. Local elections are about extending roads, improving rubbish collection, putting new roofs on school buildings and so on.

The politicians need to deliver. Simple as that!

Municipalities have one characteristic that distinguishes them from other layers of government: they are close to the people they serve and therefore must function more effectively for the citizens than more distant layers of governance. You might find some politicians who would disagree with that. But I

don't think you will find many citizens who would.

And the significance of municipal politics isn't limited to local communities. Municipalities can play a role in driving this country forward. We talk about BiH's European future. But that isn't just about signing treaties or ratifying protocols; it's about improving the quality of life, so that the citizens of this country can start to enjoy the safeguards, services and benefits that are standard elsewhere on the continent. And many of these will be delivered through the municipalities.

The municipalities are integral components of the overall reform programme. At the BiH level we are completing the institutional infrastructure that can guarantee future, peace, democratic freedoms and prosperity, no matter which political party is in the ascendant. We are, as it were, putting the roof on the BiH institutional house, completing the building process – but this won't mean anything unless it makes a difference to the man and woman in the street. And that difference is most likely to be felt at the municipal level.

Over the next six months the International Community and our BiH partners will focus on strengthening the state structures that make BiH work better; the Defense Ministry, better police, a clear state intelligence under parliamentary control.

We will also work to make sure that we can start trying War Crimes here in Bosnia at the beginning of 2005. The aim is to push open the door to NATO and the EU as soon as possible.

But that won't happen unless the BiH authorities, particularly the RS authorities, show that they are prepared, at least, to co-operate fully with the ICTY.

The economic priorities include completing preparations for the introduction of VAT, and the merging of the customs administrations.

All this may sound technical. But its results are very practical and very personal to each citizen in BiH. For what they all mean is something very straightforward. Measurable improvements to the quality of citizens' lives. That is what politics at every level should be about – that is what next week's municipal elections should be about. They are not about parties; they are about policies; they are about choosing the people who can make things better – we must use that opportunity.