

Constitutional Change Must Improve the Lot of Ordinary Citizens

As it draws closer to the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina will have to deal with reforms – on a daily basis – that touch on constitutional questions, the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said in Washington today. The High Representative was speaking at a conference organized by the US Institute for Peace to mark the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

“For the last ten years, the evolution of the Constitution enshrined in Dayton has been a reality of political life in BiH. Peace implementation, postwar recovery and the country’s development as a viable modern democracy have all been dynamic processes – not static ones. And one of the major successes of the Dayton Agreement has been that it has allowed this evolution within it,” the High Representative said.

He said that “an increasingly enlightened local political leadership” must unite to promote reform that is “organic, built on consensus, incremental and fully integrated in the detailed requirements of the EU accession process.”

The High Representative emphasized that this “is not a process that should give rise to misgiving. It should be viewed as a means of taking BiH as quickly as possible to the destination that all of its citizens fervently want to reach – full integration in Europe.”

Noting that the recent round of constitutional negotiations has shown that “the mechanics of dialogue are now firmly embedded in the BiH political environment,” the High Representative said the priority now is to translate constitutional debate into tangible benefits for citizens.

“Those charged with negotiating constitutional change cannot be allowed to forget that they are dealing with a country characterized by poorly heated schools and inadequately equipped hospitals, trams and buses that are infrequent and overcrowded, and apartment blocks where the lifts have never been repaired,” he said. “If constitutional change isn’t seen to improve the lot of ordinary citizens, it won’t have much credibility with them. BiH is a State that needs to multiply the benefits for its citizens – not multiply the perks for its politicians.”

Considerable progress has been made in the last three years to reform BiH’s “overweight, over-expensive, over-bureaucratic system of Government,” the High Representative said. “Each of these changes has involved creating or expanding the basic institutions of a light-level state, governing a highly decentralized country, and at the same time securing increases in efficiency and service. The major thrust must now be to reduce the cost of government. No state can win the loyalty of its citizens when it spends 70 percent of their taxes on government and only 30 percent on services to the people themselves.”