

High Representative's New Year Message to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina: "The Future of BiH is in your Hands"

2005 has been a pivotal year for Bosnia and Herzegovina . In October, after many months of delay, a political agreement was finally reached on police restructuring that opened the way for negotiations with the European Union to begin in November. This presents a historic opportunity for BiH – one that many believed it could never achieve. Exactly a decade after the end of a devastating war, BiH now has a future within the EU and NATO; a future in which division and conflict can be replaced with stability, prosperity and peace.

And this will have a real impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people in BiH. Membership of the EU may be distant, but the effects could start to be felt much sooner.

Progress towards the EU will bring economic development, more investment and with it more job opportunities. Combined with the introduction of a more efficient indirect tax revenue system, VAT, and changes to make government more efficient through constitutional reform this will mean that over time there will be more money available for schools, hospitals, pensions and many of the other things you want to see improve.

Once the SAA negotiations are under way, the need for constitutional change will become even more apparent than it is now. Bosnia and Herzegovina simply cannot afford to fund the current multiple layers of government. How can a state

that spends 70 percent of revenue it receives from taxes on government, and only 30 percent on services to the citizens, serve its people? How can a state that has 13 Prime Ministers and 12 Ministries of Interior fight organized crime effectively? It cannot.

The task for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the next phase will be to cut down on its government in order to create a state that spends more on social services and citizens than on civil servants and politicians. And it is important to start this now.

The experience of countries across Eastern Europe confirms that progress towards the EU and economic development are one and the same. But the benefits of reform – jobs and better services – will only be felt if progress continues, if politicians meet their commitments and reforms that have been adopted are implemented on the ground. Progress towards the EU is measured by results, not words.

I end this year more convinced than ever that this country can now take up its rightful place in the EU.

But the International Community cannot and will not do this for you. There is much hard work to be done and many challenges to be faced. If your politicians are serious about bringing this country closer to the EU, then they *must* work harder and set aside their political and personal differences in order to achieve BiH's European good. No country has succeeded in reaching Europe unless Government and Opposition parties are prepared to work together on the European agenda.

And in this next election year of 2006, the citizens will have a key role to play in this, too. In October 2006, you will decide to whom you will entrust the responsibility over the next four years for building BiH's European future for you and your children. In October the future will quite literally be in your hands. Don't let it pass you by.