

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: “A Miracle”

Paddy Ashdown discusses his final days as administrator of
Bosnia and Herzegovina—and the road ahead for the Balkan
state.

Nov. 10, 2005

The nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is preparing to mark another milestone. Next month—the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the civil war in the former Yugoslavia—Britain’s Lord Jeremy “Paddy” Ashdown will step down as the nation’s internationally-appointed high representative. Ashdown, 64, has spent the last three-and-a-half years in a post that has been likened to that of a colonial governor, an imperial viceroy and a medieval pope. Whoever succeeds him is unlikely to be given the same extensive authority, which includes the ability to impose laws and fire public officials.

Ashdown, whose high-profile leadership style has drawn both praise and criticism, has tried to put Bosnia on the path to statehood by establishing centralized structures to replace those run by the bureaucratically divided Serbian-led Republic Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation, both of which have their own parliaments as well. In a phone interview on a train ride from Brussels, Ashdown spoke to NEWSWEEK’s Ginanne Brownell about the road ahead—and the “terrible tragedy, the passion, the color and the vibrancy that is the Balkans.” Excerpts.

NEWSWEEK: How would you rate your time as high representative?

Paddy Ashdown: It has been frustrating, it has been tiring but it's been one of the most fascinating and rewarding experiences of my life. To be asked in the last quarter of your life to help build a state and a country that you are very much emotionally attached to is a privilege beyond measure. I have been hugely impressed by the sheer courage and stoicism of the ordinary citizens of BiH.

Newsweek: Have you achieved all that you hoped when you took up the job?

Paddy Ashdown: I set out three-and-a-half years ago to do three things. The first thing was to set up structures for the path to statehood. Secondly was to put BiH irreversibly on the road to Europe and third was to get as close to a point where we would not need another high representative. I think we have done those three things.

Newsweek: You said recently that Dayton was a superb agreement to end a war but a bad agreement to make a state. Has the accord outlived its relevance?

Paddy Ashdown: When I first took on this job I went to see some of the authors of Dayton, most notably Jim O'Brien. And he said, "When we wrote Dayton we wrote certain passages in there which could be used to amend Dayton and allow for Dayton to be a living instrument rather than a dead one." So I have aggressively done that. All the major reforms we have made—the establishment of a state army, integrated armed forces, establishment of a judicial structure, a single state intelligence structure—all of these have required changes to Dayton. We have used Dayton to change Dayton.

I think the task now, having built the broad structures. is to create something functional. It is not unusual that states have a certain degree of dysfunction built into them to cope with the ethnic, cultural and political mixes. Belgium, for example, and Switzerland. But no state can survive where 70

percent of its taxes are spent on government and only 30 per cent on its citizens. How do we build loyalties if we cannot even provide people with a decent education, decent welfare, decent pensions? Dayton has been superb as a first phase...but we are going to have to start thinking about moving away from the Dayton scaffolding to something else.

Newsweek: The International Commission on the Balkans released a report earlier this year that essentially stated that the only way forward for BiH was to win membership of the European Union. But isn't there concern that because it is such a long way off, people's frustrations could boil over?

Paddy Ashdown: Of course there will be frustration ...It does take a long time to complete this road [to join the EU]; [it] is not the sort of thing where you are out one day and in the next. It is a continuum in which you constantly get advantages from the process, you don't just get prizes at the end. What you do get is a significantly greater amount of European money coming in as you progress down this road. You get the advantages first of visa liberalization and then visa-free travel, something that is desperately wanted by most Bosnians. So can there be frustration with Europe? Of course there can be, there is in Britain today. What I can tell you is that what unites all parties, all ethnicities, all strata of the country is the desire to get into Europe.

Newsweek: How can there be talk of EU accession while accused war criminals like Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic remain at large?

Paddy Ashdown: Yes, this is blocking progress. The major burden of blame lies with the locals, especially the Serbs who fail to cooperate. Without their cooperation these operations [to have them face trial in The Hague] are very unlikely to succeed. Until then, the country cannot move forward.

Newsweek: Per capita, Bosnia suffered more war dead than

France did in World War I: 250,000 were killed and two million became refugees. Without international intervention, do you really believe they can reconcile themselves to living together only 10 years later?

Paddy Ashdown: They do. You can see it happening. It is a miracle that stuns me every time I see it because I know these people have a courage that I haven't got. There is complete freedom of movement in Bosnia, unlike in divided Cyprus. There are completely free elections held by the Bosnians, unlike in the Basque country in Spain. So this having happened is an absolute miracle.

Would it have happened without the international community? No, it wouldn't. But can it now continue without the international community? Yeah, it can. We handed over lock, stock and barrel to the Bosnian authorities the whole of the refugee return task, which is arguably one of the most politically sensitive tasks that we carried out. They conducted that with some ability, slightly diminished efficiency perhaps, but the outcome is that the refugee return process has continued. We have created for the first time in history the right of refugees to return and the rules are never going to be the same.

Newsweek: You have criticized the international community for not having a Balkan-wide regional policy.

Paddy Ashdown: If we wanted to look back over the last 10 years of Western international policy towards the Balkans, one of its biggest deficiencies has been the lack of a regional approach. They see things as a Kosovo problem, a Serbia-Montenegro problem, as an Albanian problem, as a Macedonia or a BiH problem. But these problems need to be solved on a regional basis.

It isn't just the EU that does not have a regional policy, it's the international community. Let me give you an example:

almost every issue that I deal with in BiH, my colleagues deal with in Kosovo and the government deals with in Belgrade. Issues like organized crime, something that creates more instability in these states than anything else, it's completely across border, it is completely regional. Yet there isn't a [systematic approach] for tackling organized crime. Drug trafficking, human trafficking—these are Balkans-wide problems.

© 2005 Newsweek, Inc.

© 2005 MSNBC.com

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9996106/site/newsweek/>