

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in BiH and Special Representative of the EU

Lord "Paddy" Ashdown has been High Representative of the international community in Bosnia Herzegovina responsible for overseeing the Bosnian peace process since May 2002. He is also Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. A former officer in the Royal Marines and British diplomat, Lord Ashdown made his name in British politics where he led the Liberal-Democratic Party between 1988 and 1999.

During the Bosnian War, Lord Ashdown was one of the most vociferous advocates decisive international intervention. At the time, he argued that this would help bring the conflict to an close and that this was in the interests of all Bosnian citizens irrespective of their ethnic origin.

NATO Review: What are the greatest challenges facing Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Lord Ashdown: There's one big challenge that stands between us and integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions, and that is cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY). This country has done amazingly well over the past nine years. I know of no country, save perhaps East Timor, which has moved so rapidly from war to peace. Indeed, during the last couple of years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved what most people considered virtually impossible. The country has full-filled almost all conditions for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union and made a serious application to NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. If the issue of cooperation with the ICTY, which is a fundamental principle of Dayton , can be resolved, then this country should have secured a future for itself by early next year. The only possible future

for this country is via integration in Euro-Atlantic structures. Eventual membership in NATO will give this country, which was ravaged by war only nine years ago, the most priceless gift of all, namely security. Eventual membership in the European Union will bring with it investment and other opportunities. Our task is to help them to get into Euro-Atlantic institutions as fast as possible without lowering the entry standards.

NR: How severe is the economic crisis facing Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Lord Ashdown: This is the issue that keeps me awake at night. I don't think that this country is threatened by a return to war. That is not the mood of the nation. The real threat is that the economy does not improve fast enough, living standards don't rise quickly enough, or, for some, don't rise at all, and that this leads to a period of instability and social unrest. The threshold of pain in this country is pretty high. Bosnians have lived in these conditions for a very long time, but there are limits even to their patience. The economy is not, of course, a new problem and even in this field considerable progress has been made. We have the most stable currency in the Balkans and we have the lowest inflation rate in the Balkans. We are also beginning aggressively to strip away the many legal impediments that prevent business being reformed. We've got rid of some 150 of those in the past couple of years. We should have started the process of economic reform much earlier, but the economy is now growing. This year, the gap between exports and imports has narrowed for the first time. Investment is rising more quickly than anticipated and growth in GDP is faster than predicted. That said, the economy is growing from a very low base and it's going to take a long time before the benefits of growth have an impact on the lives of ordinary people.

NR: How do you view the termination of SFOR and the deployment of EUFOR?

Lord Ashdown: I view it very positively and am glad to say that most Bosnians also view it in the same light. What is helpful in terms of peace stabilisation is that the destination for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the driver of the process are becoming one and the same. If there is one issue that everybody in every ethnicity, every political party and in every corner of the country is agreed upon, it is that Bosnia and Herzegovina 's ultimate destination is Europe. With the deployment of EUFOR and the other EU missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina , Europe is increasingly driving the process. The magnetic pull of Brussels is now becoming more important than the push of the High Representative. That's a very good thing. There is another question of concern to Bosnians, namely can Europe rise to the challenge. Here again, despite initial misgivings, I think most Bosnians have been reassured. We are all aware of the failings of European policy here between 1992 and 1995. Today, however, the situation is very different. Most Bosnians know that 80 per cent of the soldiers who will form EUFOR were also part of SFOR. Although there will be a change of badge and flag, there will be no change of policy, tactics or strategy. Delivery on the ground will be exactly the same.

NR: What kind of precedent does the termination of SFOR and deployment of EUFOR set?

Lord Ashdown: It is certainly a groundbreaking development because increasingly we're seeing the European foreign and security policy in practice on the ground. This is by far and away the biggest EU operation to date. The EU military mission in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* was in effect a pilot project. Europe is now taking the lead and will have to show in the coming months and years what it is capable of to ensure that the Bosnian peace process remains a success. I would argue that the deployment of EUFOR is important on a still wider scale, namely in transatlantic terms. Iraq has done terrible damage to the transatlantic relationship and

that relationship must be repaired. The only way to repair it, in my view, is to realise the vision of Kissinger and Kennedy of a twin-pillar NATO in which Europe is prepared to carry its share of the burden. The stage upon which this new relationship is being worked out is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NR: As High Representative, you have extensive powers, which some analysts argue is undermining the prospects for democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Is the role that you currently play in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the long term interest of the country?

Lord Ashdown: It is in the long-term interest, as long as it's done in the right way and doesn't last for too long. You could have asked the same question about the Allied Commission that ran Germany for some nine or ten years after the Second World War. Was that in Germany's long-term interests? Was German democracy damaged by virtue of the fact that it was governed by an international administration possessing absolute power, including even the power to impose the death penalty? These extensive international powers certainly didn't do German democracy any harm. It's not unusual to have an international administration for an interim period in the aftermath of a conflict. This was the case in both Germany and Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War to very good effect. It is the case in Kosovo today. And it has been the case in East Timor, where the international engagement is, in world-record time, now coming to an end after five years. International administration is a perfectly normal thing, but it has to be managed in such a way as to build independence and not dependency. We're now coming up to the tenth year of a strong international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The peace process to date has been highly successful. But it is now time to discuss whether the continuation of international engagement in its current form will have more upside than downside. What is clear is that the international community cannot simply close up shop and walk away. There has to be a

transition. As Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutions, the international presence within the country, and most notably the Office of the High Representative, has to move away from the current heavyweight interventionist role and to evolve into something else. In the future, the powers of the High Representative may well be reduced. The High Representative might, for example, be replaced by a Special Representative of the European Union. That will, however, be a decision for the Peace Implementation Council.

NR: What obstacles are blocking Bosnian membership of the Partnership for Peace?

Lord Ashdown: The only obstacle is cooperation with the ICTY.

NR: What are the consequences if Bosnia and Herzegovina, or more specifically Republika Srpska, fails to cooperate in arresting Radovan Karadzic?

Lord Ashdown: There have to be consequences, though I cannot say in advance what they might be. They will obviously depend on Carla Del Ponte's assessment of the level of ICTY cooperation, since she is the arbiter in these matters. Moreover, before taking any decisions, I will also have to listen to what NATO has to say. At the Istanbul Summit, NATO was clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina would not be allowed to join the Partnership for Peace in the absence of ICTY cooperation and explicitly singled out Republika Srpska as the obstacle. Clearly, there is a small group of obstructionists who believe it's more important to preserve corrupt structures and hide war criminals than to uphold international law. These obstructionists are effectively holding the country to ransom. I, nevertheless, hope that they cooperate with the ICTY so that I do not have to take further action.

NR: What does Bosnia and Herzegovina have to do to begin a stabilisation and association process with the European Union?

Lord Ashdown: The European Union set Bosnia and Herzegovina 16 tasks, 14 of which have already been completed. The key hurdle to get over, however, as for NATO, remains that of cooperation with the ICTY. As long as Bosnia and Herzegovina continues along the same road, then it's not unreasonable to expect the country to fulfil all tasks and to be able to move to the next stage. That's a remarkable achievement for a country in which more than 200,000 people were killed and a million made homeless less than ten years ago. Just compare progress here with the situation in Cyprus or in Northern Ireland. Whereas Cyprus is still a divided island, there's complete freedom of movement here. I was present in Belfast in 1969 to see Catholics burned out of their homes. In the intervening period, not one has gone back. Here a million have returned home. Bosnia and Herzegovina is arguably the world's first major successful peace-stabilisation mission. But success will only become irreversible when Bosnia and Herzegovina passes into the Partnership for Peace and into Europe.

NR: Some analysts argue that the structures imposed on Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Dayton Peace Agreement are unworkable and will condemn the country to remain dependent on the international community. Does it therefore need revisiting?

Lord Ashdown: Dayton wasn't framed to build a state, it was framed to end a war. Dayton may need reforming, but it's not our job to revisit Dayton. This is an issue for Bosnians to resolve. This is their state and the Dayton constitution is their constitution. A state is, however, dysfunctional if it spends 65 per cent of its revenue on government and only 35 per cent on its people. In these circumstances, it's not likely to create the conditions in which people feel any loyalty to it. Bosnians do have to start reforming Dayton to make their political system more functional. Indeed, they have already started doing this. The decisions taken last year to combine the armed forces under state control was a change to Dayton done by their agreement, not by my imposition. The

decision to create a single state-wide taxation system was another change to Dayton designed to make the state more functional. And similar proposals have been drawn up for reform of the police force. All these are changes to Dayton . The process of changing Dayton using the Dayton framework has begun and will have to accelerate.

NR: How long do you intend to remain in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Lord Ashdown: Until November next year.

NR: Have you been keeping a diary during your time as High Representative? Can we, therefore, look forward to a Bosnian sequel to your best-selling diary on British politics?

Lord Ashdown: I have been keeping a diary. However, I suspect that not many people in Britain or elsewhere would be interested in the intricacies of Bosnia and Herzegovina which fill my diaries at the moment, much as the intricacies of the Liberal Democrats and our arrangements with Labour used to in the past. There is a very limited market for this kind of material. There are, however, some broad lessons to be learned from the Bosnian peace process and it may be worth trying to identify these and other basic principles of peace stabilisation.

For more on the Office of the High Representative, see www.ohr.int

For more on the work of the European Union's Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina , see www.eusrbih.org

<http://www.nato.int/docu/review/pdf/0404-eng.pdf>