

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, At the closing session of the International Youth Summit

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the themes of this conference has been “empowerment”

You have gathered here for three days to discuss challenges facing our society – violence, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, unemployment.

These issues *affect* all of us in one way or another. But we are not passive subjects. We can act and react. When we do that, when we seize the initiative. Then we are empowered.

You have been talking about action that can be taken to combat negative trends. The important word is action. When *you* take action you change the way your circumstances act upon you – *you* begin to act upon your circumstances.

You may fail; you may choose the wrong road; you may be mistaken in your judgment or disappointed in the outcome of your efforts – but all of that is relative. Because when you act you change the chemistry of your surroundings. You begin to have a say in how things will turn out.

Your very presence here today is a reflection of empowerment. You are not passive. You are active. You are exerting an influence on things that will have an impact on your life.

You are doing that by right.

And because of commitment. And because you think it will make a difference!

And I am here speaking to you for the same reasons.

It is very important to keep in mind always that empowerment isn't something that is given – it is something that you take.

Believe me, if you don't take the lead, others will.

And those who have taken the lead in the recent history of Southeast Europe have not been uniformly impressive. While nationalism, for example, has consumed political energy, pertinent issues, bread and butter issues, issues that have a direct bearing on the quality of citizens' lives have too often been neglected. Schools have gone unheated, organized crime has spread – ruining lives through drugs and violence – and teenagers have been obliged to contemplate the dismal prospects offered by a wholly inadequate job market.

And what can change this? Only one thing – politics.

The rational and healthy reaction of young people to politics is dislike and distrust. I understand that. But there are only two ways to change things: politics – or the gun. And there has been too much of old people and the gun here in Bosnia and Herzegovina – and too little of young people and politics.

There can be no argument that a generational change in politics is long overdue. By engineering such a change we can create – *you* can create – the right circumstances to move forward.

Those who currently dominate political debate will not make way for you willingly – you have to seize the initiative on your own account. You have to take what is rightfully yours – a say in the future, in *your* future.

Yours is a perspective that is – or ought to be – fresh. It is a perspective that is untainted by failure.

You have the capacity to think outside the box – and the box that defines politics in this part of the world, let me assure you, is well worth thinking outside of.

So if there is a clarion call coming from this convention I hope it will be that the time has come for the young people of Southeast Europe to move from the shadows to the front row of politics. You have a place in the policy debate, and now is the time to take that place and create a better future for all.

Thank you