

# Ashdown 'running Bosnia like a Raj'

Ian Traynor in Zagreb

Paddy Ashdown displays a "bewildering conception of democratic politics" and Ms exercise of absolute powers in Bosnia is frustrating the establishment of a functioning democracy in a country recovering from war, according to a study of nation building in the Balkans.

In a scathing critique of seven years of western efforts to turn Bosnia into a liberal democracy following the 1992-95 war, the study singles out the former Liberal Democrat leader, whom it accuses of turning Bosnia into a "European Raj", deploying the methods and lessons of the British in India in the 19th century.

The 15-page report is being published next week by the respected thinktank on Balkan affairs, the European Stability Initiative, which is based in Berlin and Sarajevo, and it will be followed by a lengthier study of peacekeeping and nation building in Bosnia.

It says the sweeping powers vested in Lord Ashdown as the international community's "high representative" running Bosnia are enfeebling the state, discouraging local political initiative, and entrenching a culture of international dependency. "You can't create a stable democracy by these authoritarian methods" said Gerald Knaus, one of the authors of the study and director of the ESI. "There's a fundamental flaw in the system."

While conceding that mistakes have been made over the years by the international administration in Bosnia, Julian Braithwaite, Lord Ashdown's spokesman, defended his record: "Bosnia is not a European Raj, as they say provocatively. This is a polemic, but there's an important debate going on, and it is a contribution."

The flaws in the international design for Bosnia, the first western experiment in nation building after the cold war, show how not to proceed in Afghanistan or Iraq the authors of the study warn.

Mr Knaus added that the target of his criticism was less Lord Ashdown, who has been running Bosnia since May last year, than the institution of the office of the high representative, set up to run Bosnia as a result of the Dayton peace agreements of November 1995.

However, he also said that the former British politician was making much greater use of his untrammelled powers as a "benevolent despot" than his predecessors.

On average Lord Ashdown was imposing 14 decrees or decisions every month, compared with an average of four in 1999. Mr Ashdown's spokesman contested the figure, saying the rate was 11 imposed decisions per month.

The central criticism of the international regime in Bosnia is that there are no checks and balances on Lord Ashdown's powers, and no accountability, whether locally or internationally.

The office of the high representative can "dismiss presidents, prime ministers, judges, and mayors without having to submit its decisions for review. It can veto candidates for ministerial positions without needing publicly to present any evidence. It can impose legislation and create new institutions without having to estimate the cost to Bosnian taxpayers. The HR is not accountable to any elected institution at all", the study says.

While draconian powers may have been justified in the tense emergency situation immediately after the war, it is arguable that seven years on, greater powers should be exercised by elected Bosnian politicians.

Lord Ashdown's officials admit that his sweeping powers "stunt the political development of the country", but opinion polling carried out for his office also shows broad support for the use of such powers when needed to force the pace of reform.

---

**'You can't create a stable democracy by these authoritarian methods. There's a fundamental flaw'**

---

One particularly controversial use of dictatorial powers concerns judicial reform. Following a largescale purge of the judiciary and prosecutors by Lord Ashdown's predecessor last year, he is trying to create by decree a depoliticised, impartial, and competent judicial system.

Mr Braithwaite said Bosnian politicians were too venal and corrupt to be entrusted with the task themselves, although every country in eastern Europe faced the same challenges after the collapse of communism and had to reform their judiciaries themselves.

While Lord Ashdown intervenes at will in routine economic and political matters in Bosnia, one of the most central tasks ordered by the international community in 1995 remains unfulfilled seven years after the international takeover — the arrests of the most wanted war crimes suspects. Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb political and military chiefs, who are both wanted for genocide by the international tribunal in the Hague, remain at large.

[guardian.co.uk/yugoslavia](http://guardian.co.uk/yugoslavia)