

6 October 2003

Lord Ashdowns Autumn Address: a New Era for Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Dear friends of ESI,

On 16 July 2003, Marcus Cox (ESI Senior Editor) and Gerald Knaus (ESI President) sent an open letter to Lord Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Published by IWPR (www.esiweb.org/europeanraj/article.php), the letter put forward a concrete proposal.

It argued that the OHRs powers to dismiss public officials should be dispensed with; that the powers to impose legislation should be defined and limited to a publicly declared agenda; and that at the latest by the summer of 2004 there should be no further need for the Bonn powers at all.

The debate on international power in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been intense throughout the summer. Numerous people and institutions reacted to the article on the Bonn powers which appeared in the Journal of Democracy in July 2003 (www.journalofdemocracy.org). Most of these reactions can be found on the ESI website (www.esiweb.org), including responses by the OHR itself, criticism of the ESI proposals by the International Crisis Group and an investigation in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of a specific OHR dismissal (30 August; Die Macht der Gewohnheit, with English translation).

The debate has recently taken an important new turn, however, as OHR has begun to clarify its own approach to Bosnia's sovereignty.

On 10 September 2003, Lord Ashdown addressed the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In his presentation, the High Representative urged the Parliament to adopt legislation to change the country's tax system and reform Bosnia's defence structures; two of the most politically contentious issues in Bosnia today. At the same time, Ashdown underlined that the passage of these crucial reforms depended solely on Bosnia's elected representatives. For the first time, the highest official of the International Community in Bosnia set out a clear and principled argument as to why foreign imposition could no longer substitute for Bosnia's elected institutions:

(Lord Ashdown:) Some may believe that if you throw these agreements out, I will intervene with a compromise solution of my own. They are making a terrible miscalculation, because it is not going to happen. Indeed, it cannot happen. Again, let me explain. The European Union is currently in the midst of conducting a Feasibility Study for BiH. They have made it clear that you cannot get to Europe through the Office of the High Representative; that these reforms have to be your reforms, not mine. That is not empty rhetoric. It is hard political fact.

If this approach receives the backing of the Peace Implementation Council, then with his Autumn Address, Lord Ashdown will have inaugurated a new era in the political development of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The era of state-building through international decrees that was launched in 1998, and reached its climax between 2000 and 2003, will have ended. From now on, the future of Bosnia will lie in the hands of her own people, acting through elected politicians, interest groups and other civic actors. Bosnia will become a normal democracy, like all of its neighbours in Central and South Eastern Europe.

No one should be under any illusions, however, about what this means for Bosnia's young democracy. As they take the future in their own hands, Bosnia's elected representatives face formidable challenges. They must overcome the legacy of an economy that has been in almost continuous decline for twenty years. They must strengthen public institutions while at the same time reining back public spending. They must find ways to make government work effectively, despite the present constitutional constraints. And for all of this to succeed there will continue to be a need for substantial international support.

All this will force another issue to the top of the domestic and international agenda: how the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign state into a prosperous and peaceful Europe can be made a reality and support domestic reforms. For Bosnian elected representatives taking responsibility into their own hands is merely the precondition. Most of the hard work of improving domestic governance remains to be done.

In the coming weeks, ESI will publish a major new report on the economic and social challenges facing Bosnia today; on the capacity of public institutions in Bosnia today to meet those challenges; and on the most effective role international actors can play in the new context created by the phasing out of the Bonn powers.

Yours sincerely,

The ESI team--