Speech by the Rt Hon the Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon GCMG KBE CH

At the GSF/SEESOX lunch following the seminar:

'Bosnia And Herzegovina: New International Thinking'

National Liberal Club

Tuesday 3rd March 2015

Thank you for inviting me today

Forgive me if, in what I say, I am rather blunt, but I am getting increasingly concerned about Bosnia and Herzegovina and, in troubled times, it is as well to be straightforward.

I have read the conclusions of SEESOX conference

I agree with some of them. But not, I fear all.

The title of your seminar is *"new international thinking"*. But it is not new thinking that is required in Bosnia, but a new will and a renewed determination to insist on reform in the country, instead of being satisfied with stasis – or something very close to it.

It is not ideas that have failed the international community these last 10 years, since Bosnia began to drift backwards. It is political will, co-ordination and an ability to use the levers that we have in a united and effective fashion.

We used to have a saying in OHR when I worked there.

"Unless you are prepared to slay the dragon, you cannot save the maiden"

The dragon in BiH is state dysfunctionality - and those who, 20 years after Dayton, still use that dysfunctionality to drive the country towards partition.

It is because of dysfunctionality that Bosnia is so burdened with multiple layers of politics and politicians that it cannot find the money to provide its citizens with what they need.

Jobs
A secure environment

The rule of law
A decent health service
A modern education

And it is because the provision of these things is the only way to create loyalty to the state, that Bosnia's politics and loyalties remain mired in ethnic division and dependency, sometimes buttressed by dangerous appeals to religious antagonism.

It is because of dysfunctionality that Bosnia cannot secure the only future which will give it security and prosperity – a future as a full member of the EU and NATO.

So why, constantly and repeatedly, do we shy away from tackling the Bosnian dragon of state dysfunctionality and instead seek to find more and more elaborate ways of distracting the beast with smaller offerings – like economic reform – in the hope the it will fail to notice what we are doing?

This is not to say that economic reform is not necessary. Of course it is.

It is rather to assert that though economic reform is necessary it is not sufficient - unless it is part of - rather than a substitute for - functional reform. Absent that, any economic reform will inevitably be subverted - as so often in the past - by those who have an interest in maintaining the status quo because that is how they preserve their power and line their pockets.

Yet even when it comes to the economic reform package currently under discussion, Europe is divided. On the one hand some nations sensibly want to enshrine economic reform in IMF conditionality. Others shy away from this because of the perceived risk of increasing disorder, societal collapse and political upheaval – I suppose on the basis that one Greece at a time is more than enough.

I need to remind us that:

> After more than a decade of real progress towards statehood and stability, Bosnia started to go backwards nearly 10 years ago and now tracks with increasing speed towards either break up or the dubious status of being Europe's deepest and most intractable black hole.

I need to remind us that:

> This has occurred in a country in which the EU has more instruments of leverage than in any other on earth – a huge aid programme; a heavyweight mission; a large police reform programme; EUFOR; substantial leverage over the actions of neighbouring states; a special EU representative and access to a High Rep still equipped with the Dayton powers.
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> It is not that we do not have the leverage to stop Bosnia moving backwards. It is that we have not, these last ten years, found the will to use it.

I need to remind us too that:

> Despite strong statements after last year's elections that the international community would this time insist that things would be different, they aren't different at all.
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> There is still no functioning government at either the federation or the state level, five months after the elections.
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> Meanwhile, it has taken us three long tortuous months of heavyweight pressure to finally succeed in negotiating Bosnian signatures on a piece of paper.
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> Maybe it will work. I certainly hope so.
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> But don't hold your breath.
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> The history of the last ten years is littered with pieces of paper which were launched with equal hope and fanfare, but which, for want of international will to make them mean anything, have ended in nothing.

I need to remind us that:

> The effects of the stasis that has gripped Bosnia this last decade are not confined to Bosnia alone
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> Last Saturday in Belgrade there was a huge gathering in the presence of the Patriarch and the Serbian president to celebrate the founding, not Bosnia, but of Republika Srpska
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> In Zagreb the president of the Croatian HDZ expressed his support for a renewed calls by Bosnian Croats for a third entity.
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> In the Middle East, there are now around 330 young men from Bosnia to be found in Syria and Iraq under the banner of ISIS. This, by the way, from a country of less than 4 million about the size of Wales.
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> And of course Moscow continues to play Ukrainian mischief with Bosnian instability, wherever it can.

In the 1990s the world had to learn the painful and bloody lesson that ignoring instability in Bosnia can have regional, even global consequences. Do we really have to learn that all over again, a quarter of a century later?

I am sorry to be so brutal.

But I fear that during these last ten years the international community and Bosnia have been locked in a kind of diplomatic ground hog day waltz. We sweep off into the same old dance together, accompanied by the same old expressions of hope and determination, only to find ourselves back at the same old place, which we then declare as somewhere entirely new.

We have consistently - and it seems now, will repeatedly – replace killing the dragon of Bosnia's dysfunctionality, with offering it instead a series of small scale, diversionary reforms, in the vain hope that while the beast is looking the other way, we can nip in and save the maiden for her true destiny – marriage into the EU and NATO.

It hasn't happened and it won't happen.

Now some are even proposing that actually, it doesn't have to happen at all. It will be good enough for us to just pretend it has happened. Then by some Brussels sleight of hand, an unreformed Bosnia can be quietly sideslipped into candidate status.

It seems an attractive short cut of course. Even though we know short cuts rarely work - as we have seen with other EU countries.

But it's not a shortcut. It's a myth.

For behind it I suspect is a willingness on the part of some EU states to declare success by welcoming Bosnia to candidate status and then leaving her there - in limbo - forever.

Still a black hole of dysfunctionality and corruption.

Still wracked with division and obstruction.

Still a source of recruits for ISIS.

But now semi-safely parked in a never-never land on the edge of Europe, where she can do minimum damage. A place which we in the international community can never move forward and from which we can never disengage.

That remarkable EU civil servant who used to work with me in my days as High Rep, Reinhardt Priebe, used to say that Europe was not just a union of ideals, it was also a union of standards.

Quite so!

And one of those standards, surely is functionality. Is there not a minimum standard of functionality which is required for EU membership?

Of course there is.

So why do we go on dodging the issue in Bosnia?

Why after such extraordinary progress towards a functional Bosnian state for the first 10 years after Dayton, did we abandon the effort in these last ten years?

No one is suggesting a centralised Bosnia.

No one is suggesting either that there should be a return to the Bonn powers to move things forward – though they should be preserved in case things begin to move dangerously backwards, because some destructive elements seek to re-interpret Dayton to support division rather than unity.

No one is suggesting either abolishing the entities.

A functional Bosnia will look and feel much more like highly decentralised Belgium than over centralised Britain.

But it must be functional – and it cannot be constantly held hostage by those who wish it to fail.

What is needed now from the international community - and especially from Brussels - is not new thinking but rather a new courage to face down Bosnia's separatists and obstructionists and a new will to use, in a united and coherent fashion, the immense leverage to move things forward which we can mobilise, both in country and in the region.

If I wanted to get things done in my time in Bosnia, it was not just to Brussels that I turned, it was also to Zagreb and Belgrade. No policy for Bosnia will work unless it is anchored within an overall policy for the region.

My other key experience in Bosnia was that if the international community is hesitant, risk averse and divided, there is nothing it can achieve.

But if it is united, purposeful and determined, there is nothing it cannot achieve.

Ten years ago, after a decade of extraordinary progress in Bosnia, the international community - and especially Brussels - took its foot of the accelerator and its eye off the road.

What we need now is change of gear and direction.

Or alternatively we can of course, go on as we are.

Hoping to distract Bosnia from the task of functional reform, but in reality distracting ourselves.

Hoping for better in the future, in the face of all experience to the contrary from the past.

Ducking the central issue of functionality because we have allowed local players to frighten us away from it.

And launching ourselves into another decade in which Bosnia sinks further and further into the black hole, while we in Europe and the international community remain further and further away from the task to which we laid our hand twenty long years ago: helping Bosnia towards the only peace and prosperity it can have, as a full, functional and proud member of the Euro Atlantic Brussels institutions.