Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in BiH: “BiH cannot be pressured into a new constitution”

I believe that the Dayton agreement was an extraordinary agreement. Today BiH is acknowledged as the most successful large-scale peace mission in the world. This is how Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in BiH, evaluates the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina ten years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

“The real question is why was Dayton so successful? There are two important elements here: firstly, the agreement was strong enough to maintain peace, and on the other hand it was flexible enough to enable the implementation of necessary reforms of police, defence, etc.” Ashdown said.

In his opinion, BiH has made tremendous progress in the past ten years, and especially during the last three years since he took office as the High Representative.

“These were difficult reforms, and they were particularly difficult for the RS. I want to pay tribute to the RS leaders who made police reform possible. The next phase for BiH begins today, and there are two important segments in this phase; firstly, we must make BiH far more efficient, so that it could serve its citizens, and secondly, we must see a progressive phase-out of the International Community,” Ashdown noted.

Nezavisne Novine: Will Washington be a new Dayton, in other words, will BiH get a new constitution? How do you see Bosnia and Herzegovina after Washington?

Paddy ASHDOWN: No. Washington will not be a new Dayton . BiH will not get a new constitution in Washington . This time, writing the BiH Constitution will be a long process, one that will take some time. But the reason why Washington is so important is that the politicians of BiH must understand that this is the next task, the next priority. Secondly, they must understand that they will have to do this themselves, it cannot be done by the International Community. Thirdly, they must understand this will require a consensus. And fourthly, they must understand that the process must begin now, despite the fact that, for the most part, it will have to wait until after the 2006 elections. Washington is important because it will open this process.

Nezavisne Novine: BiH will begin SAA negotiations by the end of the year. How important is this progress for BiH?

Paddy ASHDOWN: This is a tremendous step for BiH. I think it is the most important milestone that BiH has crossed ten years after Dayton . Therefore, it is the most significant moment after Dayton . Many thought we would never reach this point, but I wish to pay tribute to all those who made it possible to implement reforms that brought us where we are. Therefore, everything changes. As of today, the future will be different. BiH has a safe future ahead, it will receive more assistance from the EU, it will get much more foreign investment, it can finally start planning for a visa-free regime. Therefore, BiH has completed the first phase, and today it is entering a new phase, the phase of European integration.

Nezavisne Novine: Will the leaders of BiH reach an agreement on constitutional changes in Washington ? What kind of outcome of these negotiations do you expect?

Paddy ASHDOWN: You might want to ask the BiH politicians that question, because it is not something that can be done by the International Community, nor is it something that can be imposed by one people to another, or by two peoples onto the third – it is something that must be done by a consensus. Therefore, this work must be done. Bosnia and Herzegovina spends so much on governance, and so little on its citizens. Why is your healthcare so poor, your hospitals in a terrible condition, why are doctors underpaid, pensions so inadequate, social welfare so poor? Approximately 70 percent of taxpayers’ money is spent on government and administration, while only 30 percent is spent on citizens. Therefore, this needs to be done. And it must be done by consensus, but I must repeat once again, it most certainly has to be done. The present Constitution of BiH makes its citizens poorer and poorer, without any chances of prosperity.

Nezavisne Novine: The idea of a single president and single government is unacceptable for the RS

leaders, unlike the politicians from the Federation of BiH. How can these opposing views be reconciled?

Paddy ASHDOWN: It is up to them to decide. This cannot be done by the International Community, it cannot be imposed by the High Representative. We want to help, we will facilitate, we will give money, but the bottom line is that it must be their agreement.

Nezavisne Novine: How would you comment on allegations that BiH politicians in Washington will only be signing a new BiH Constitution that is already written? Will the politicians from BiH be pressured to adopt a new BiH Constitution?

Paddy ASHDOWN: No, I do not think pressure will help. First of all, I think it is something that must be done by agreement. Let me be clear, British, German and American taxpayers give their money to BiH. So how do I explain to British taxpayers, my taxpayers, that they are throwing their money away into a black hole, that their money is not used to help the people, but to pay politicians. This means that, until you make your system far more efficient, you will not be able to continue like this, with our taxpayers financing your politicians. Is that pressure? No, I would rather say it is the reality, real politics, real life. You cannot expect taxpayers from Western countries to finance BiH if BiH does not use this money efficiently, by spending it on its impoverished people, and not on politicians who are already quite wealthy.

Nezavisne Novine: How do you see Bosnia and Herzegovina after your departure, who will be your successor, and are you satisfied with reforms implemented during your mandate?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I am never fully satisfied. I always want to do more, faster, better. But when I came here three and a half years ago, I set myself a task to put BiH on the road to statehood, and to put it irreversibly on the road to Europe. Today BiH stands at the gates of Europe, and I have given myself another task, which is to bring this country as close as possible to a point where it will no longer need the High Representative. If the progress continues, the function of the High Representative will no longer be needed after the next year's elections. Therefore, viewed from that perspective, I am satisfied. How do I see BiH? I see it on the road to Europe and NATO. The most difficult part of this road is now behind BiH.

Nezavisne Novine: What is your message to citizens of BiH?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Well, do find some time to celebrate, because this is, indeed, a success, but get back to work very quickly because the task ahead of us, the journey ahead of us, will be a very long one. There will be no visa-free regime, there will be no foreign investment, if we do not move faster on this road. I would also like to add that there is not a single country that joined the EU without a consensus between the Opposition and government. If the BiH politicians are not ready to show statesmanship, to create a common front on the road to Europe, then the chances for success will be limited, while chances for quick success will be completely lost. Everyone must work together on the European agenda in order to bring BiH into Europe as soon as possible.

A signature will not arrest Karadžić and Mladić

Nezavisne Novine: Political and religious leaders will sign a joint statement in Washington , committing themselves to ensure full cooperation with the Hague tribunal. How much will that contribute to arresting Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Perhaps it will help in some way, but I think it is very relevant. If the RS politicians are ready once again to express their commitment to bring these two to justice, it will improve the political atmosphere, which will contribute to their arrest. If you are asking me if this statement means they will be arrested, then the answer is no, but if you are asking me if it will help in the overall campaign and efforts to arrest them, then the answer is, certainly, yes.