Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative to BiH: "A Historic Day for BiH"

*The start of the Stabilization and Association negotiations should be celebrated * A huge job is only ahead of us * Talks on the abolition of the visa regime will follow * Constitutional changes will continue after elections*

The endorsement of the decision on the start of Stabilization and Association negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina , which is expected to happen today in Brussels , represents a historic day. This is a day for which many of us have been working long and hard. BiH should be proud that it has passed this road in such a short period of time. This is a remarkable success.

Many claimed that it wasn't possible to fulfill the 16 conditions in three and a half years, but they were wrong. I remember that during one of the first meetings we had, Prime Minister Adnan Terzic told me that he had only one goal – to take BiH through the gate leading to Europe. And he succeeded in that – the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said in an interview with "Dnevni Avaz".

We met Ashdown in Washington yesterday. He was staying in the US capital in order to meet officials of President George W. Bush's administration, and officials of the international financial institutions as well as United Nations officials.

Short deadlines

Dnevni avaz: Today, as you yourself have pointed out, a historic decision is being made – the negotiations on BiH's entry into the EU are starting. How long could these negotiations last?

Paddy Ashdown: I hope that the SAA negotiations will be completed by October. It is possible if one gets to work without delay. Therefore, I expect the politicians – both politicians in power and the Opposition politicians – to sit down straight away and make an agreement that they will absolutely support the adoption of laws and regulations leading to the EU.

It seems to me that the Slovenians, when they embarked on this road, had approximately 3000 laws ahead of them to adopt. There is no country in Europe which passed this journey without having the authorities and the Opposition working on it jointly.

That is why I'm calling on the politicians in BiH to reach an agreement. The elections are going to happen soon. We will see who will win the elections and form the government. Whoever that is, they will have to count on the support of the Opposition in moving along the European road.

The Opposition may attack and criticize the authorities with regard to issues that are not linked to the European road, but the authorities and the Opposition must work together on this project. Without that, BiH will not be able to move fast along the road ahead.

Dnevni avaz: Why do you insist on that so much?

Paddy Ashdown: The beginning of the SAA process represents an encouragement for foreign investors, a possibility for new jobs, better living standards, better services in the health care sector, higher pensions... It is also a precondition for the abolition of the visa regime... But all this is not possible without a united front by the authorities and the Opposition for a faster journey on the European road.

Dnevni avaz: Is that in sight?

Paddy Ashdown: No, it is not. Unfortunately. This front is necessary. If it does not exist, the chances of completing this process are few, and for it to be short – none.

Dnevni avaz: You have mentioned the visa regime. What about it?

Paddy Ashdown: It's time we dealt with this issue and I am glad that Prime Minister Terzic is already working hard on this issue. We will see whether it is wise for me to get involved in that project before leaving the office of High Representative in January.

At any rate, it is time to start the action for liberalizing and subsequently abolishing the visa regime. I believe that it is a task either for me or for my successor – to start, together with the prime minister, the activities for abolishing visas. This, of course, will not happen soon, nor will it be easy. It is important to start it now.

Initially, it might be expected for the visa regime to be liberalized, to get visas more easily, then certain categories, let's say, such as distinguished businesspeople, might be exempt from the visa regime, while, later on, this right would be given to every BiH citizen.

No deadlines

Dnevni avaz: When? How many years are in question?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not wish to set deadlines. We have learned in BiH that things can develop faster than we thought they would. However, this will take time. Last week, the EU said that BiH should put in order the situation in its own backyard – improve border supervision, strengthen the rule of law…

The BiH borders continue to be unacceptably porous. The number of illegal immigrants is still huge. BiH borders must be watertight, and we are ready to help that process happen.

In terms of this, I have already prepared a letter to Prime Minister Terzic suggesting thas a meeting of all institutions dealing with these problems be organized in order to draw up a plan with the International Community representatives on how to strengthen the borders and in which way, we, the International Community, can help best in this regard.

Dnevni avaz: The negotiations on the change of the BiH Constitution are underway in Washington . What do you expect?

Paddy Ashdown: A very important part of BiH's road to statehood is in question. I, as well as BiH citizens, expect a lot from these changes. More than two years ago I said that the moment we passed through the gate leading towards the EU we'd have to face the shortcomings of the organization of BiH.

This is necessary not for the sake of Europe, but for the sake of BiH citizens, who deserve that more money is spent on them, and less on the authorities. Now the situation is opposite and this country spends 70 percent of its budget on the functioning of the authorities. This has to be reduced.

I am glad that the process of negotiations on the change of the BiH Constitution has started. I believe that it will gather speed after the forthcoming elections. Therefore, the substance is not how far we'll get, but to start the process of constitutional change with Washington and to continue it after the elections next year. The more we achieve now in the USA , the better.

The united position of the International Community

Paddy Ashdown: We hope that we will, sooner or later, have one president of the state, a prime minister, a strong government, a greater number of state-level delegates and a smaller number of Entity delegates… But, these are matters that the domestic politicians need to reach an agreement on, on the basis of a consensus. For me, it is important that the process has started and that it will be continued, particularly after the forthcoming elections.

The International Community is united in its position that changes to the Constitution need to happen, but the local authorities must do that on the basis of consensus and this is a precondition for the next phase of relations with

the EU and the world in general – the High Representative emphasized.

A letter to the BiH citizens

Paddy Ashdown: I am leaving BiH soon and now, when we have passed this important crossroads on the road to the EU, I wish to send a personal letter to the address of every BiH citizen in which I will lay out what has been achieved so far, how far we have come, what it means and what is still ahead of us. In doing so, I wish the citizens personally to be a part of the European process – Ashdown said.