

Interview, Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: “Yes, I did go to Karadzic”

After his four-year mandate as the International Community's High Representative for BiH, a majority of people in BiH believe he has not justified his position. He, on the other hand, believes he is going home following a job well done. Results that Ashdown is proud of do not mean much to many people in BiH, who, in most cases, view effects of his tenure as insufficient

Start: How do you feel when, after almost four years of your mandate, ten editors of the most important media in Bosnia and Herzegovina have given you a negative mark?

Paddy Ashdown: This is not a beauty contest. I did not come here to be popular. I will look back at the last four years and compare the results with the tasks that I set for myself in my first address to the State Parliament, on May 27, 2002. I said that I wanted to do four things. The first task was to put BiH irreversibly on the road to statehood. The second task was to transition to Europe as soon as possible. The third task was to come as soon as possible to the position where BiH would no longer need the High Representative. At that time I did not believe I would be the last High Representative, but I judge my success by how close we are to that moment. The fourth task was to stop the hemorrhage of young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina. After four years there is a single tax system, single State-level control over the armed forces, single judiciary under single control of the High Judicial Council, unified Mostar, single Council of Ministers without the rotation system. Of course, much is still to be done, but the structure is there and BiH stands at the gates of the European Union. Frankly, I am dissatisfied by the fact that too many young people do not see their future in this country. Many people thought that all these things would be impossible to achieve within such a short period of time. Many lost the elections but want to be a part of government and then they blame the International Community.

Start: Who are the people who, as you say, would like to preserve the status quo?

Paddy Ashdown: All people with criminal control over the system. You know perfectly well who they are.

Start: Are they leaders of nationalist parties in the country?

Paddy Ashdown: Of course, why is Dragan Covic before the court? Judiciary has brought many local political party leaders to courts. But whether you like it or not, these people were elected by the electorate. My clear position was that corruption represents a vulnerable point for the nationalist parties. That is why we attacked that point. However, you know as well as I do that the nationalist parties are not the only corrupt parties. There are other political parties that are also corrupt. Would corrupt forces within these parties prefer immunity for their politicians? Of course they would and we therefore had to strip away that immunity. Would they prefer the absence of any high-level court which can process their cases? Of course they would.

Never believe in local figures

Start: During your mandate the unemployment rate increased by some 5 percent. Are you ready to take responsibility for such results?

Paddy Ashdown: Where did you get this information?

Start: These are statistical data available to everyone....

Paddy Ashdown: I do not know where you got this information from, but these are not figures available to the International Community. One of the important things in this country is never to trust local figures. The IMF shows 5.6 percent economic growth, in spite of the downturn of international funds and the fact that the Balkans region has the greatest level of gray economy. Their data also show 23 percent export growth in the last year and 23.2

percent growth in industrial production. Foreign investment has increased by 25 percent and inflation is the lowest in the Balkans. Unfortunately, this still has no impact on the life of ordinary citizens. The IMF and World Bank, whose information is relevant, view Bosnia and Herzegovina as one of the most successful developing economies, beginning from a very low base.

Start: You stated, but only at the end of your mandate, that the nationalist parties couldn't carry out the reform of BiH. Do you regret the fact that you selected them for your partners?

Paddy Ashdown: You have to recall my exact statement. First of all, it might just as well be an unpleasant fact, but the nationalist parties won the elections. I have been fighting nationalism my whole life and not only in BiH. But the people elected them. No matter how much I personally dislike nationalism, I am a democrat and I must accept the ballot box results. There are some people in non-nationalist parties who believe that I should have changed the results of the ballot boxes and should have brought them back to power. They have never forgiven me for failing to do so. But sorry – such is democracy. What I could do was to tell them that the nationalist parties had to be under enormous pressure of reforms. They were forced to become reformists and there is a division within those parties now. It is very obvious in the HDZ, the SDS even in the SDA although it is less visible there. I want to remind you of what I said: nationalist parties may lead BiH to the gates of Europe, but they may not be able to complete this job and reach the final destination. Now, the question is how to eliminate these nationalist parties? One of the ways is to vote against their return to power. Frankly, it is with regret that I have to say that this is not very likely to happen. Still, we will see what the outcome is going to be. There is a different way too. The HDZ in Zagreb is an example of that. This is not the same HDZ as it was under Tudjman. By forcing the nationalist structures to implement reform you get factions within the party. That is the case of Raguz vs. Covic, and you can find the very same elements in other political parties. I call it the *sanaderization* of political parties.

Start: So, even after your four years in BiH you still believe that nationalist parties can implement the reform of this county?

Paddy Ashdown: My answer is yes. And now the other question: can they be forced to implement the reform? Of course they can. Whether you like it or not these reforms have been implemented by nationalist parties. Whether these parties can reform themselves is a completely different question. The question is whether the HDZ in the Raguz's hands would be any different from the HDZ in Covic's hands? I am not saying the HDZ would be a social democratic party or a liberal party, but these differences would be obvious.

Start: It was expected that you would react more strongly against obstructions of nationalist parties...

Paddy Ashdown: Many people believe I reacted too strongly too often. Wasn't I called a British Maharaja? I do not think I was too soft. In only one night I removed half of the total number of politicians that had been removed by all previous High Representatives, to force the SDS to cooperate with the Hague Tribunal.

I do not have time to react to nonsense

Start: You did not want to give a public answer to some very important questions. Why, for example, have you never spoken about your visits to the prison camps in the RS?

Paddy Ashdown: Yes I have.

Start: When they invited you to "60 minuta" to speak about it, you did not want to go.

Paddy Ashdown: It is all in my Diaries and I testified about it in The Hague. Had they wanted the truth on 60 minuta they could have found it in my testimony against Milosevic and the Manjaca Commander. Witnesses spoke of people dying in Manjaca before my arrival. I was the first person that brought cameras there and afterwards there were no such cases in Manjaca. Serb generals told me my visit to Manjaca would have me killed. I told them I would go there and if they wanted to kill me they could do it in front of the TV cameras. I was the first person who brought TV cameras to Trnopolje and the world learned about that camp then.

Start: Why did not you speak about it on TV?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not have to do it. I do not have to defend myself against everything that has been said

about me in public.

Start: You have never reacted to Luka Karadzic's claims that you were on his brother's payroll list?

Paddy Ashdown: You are wrong. We reacted on the same day and issued a press release saying those were absolute lies. We asked from him to present any evidence. He did not do it, as he could not present any evidence. There is nothing in my life that would be more important to me than my arrival to this town. Not for an afternoon, but for weeks during the war. Twice a year. I risked my life together with other citizens and sometime I had to fight against Karadzic.

Start: But you did go to see Karadzic. Why?

Paddy Ashdown: I was with Karadzic, of course I was. I wanted to hear his side of the story and tell him what was going on and ask him what he was going to do about it. I went to Karadzic the same way I went to see Milosevic to tell them I would meet them in The Hague because of their deeds. And I did that. Why did you not look into the transcripts of my testimony before The Hague ?

Start: Of course we read them, but you did not want to answer questions about it. You also did not want to answer a series of texts about your engagement in the British secret service?

Paddy Ashdown: I will not answer to that either. Responding to such nonsense would not leave me time for anything else. It is a whole bunch of nonsense, you know.

Start: The question here is the quantity of removals. Maybe the removal of several key persons that obstruct reforms could have been much more effective. Specifically, removal of Dragan Andan who is, on the basis of evidence, a close associate of Ratko Mladic and connected with crimes in Srebrenica....

Paddy Ashdown: His role in Srebrenica has not been proven. I work in line with what the Hague Tribunal tells me to do. There are people who decide about this. If I were to remove people on the basis of rumours I would have to remove people everywhere, as there are rumors everywhere, on all sides. If somebody is the head of the police service, such as Dragan Andan, I get in touch with the Hague Tribunal to check whether or not they have any evidence against him. And only if they say that they have evidence against him can I issue a removal Decision. We asked the Hague Tribunal and there is no evidence against Andan. I am not saying there will be no evidence in the future, but at the moment there is none.

Start: Why did you leave the chief auditors of the BiH institutions, Dragan Kulina and Samir Musovic, to the mercy of politicians after the two reported about many irregularities in the financial business operations of State institutions? Did you not pronounce them to be BiH knights?

Paddy Ashdown: Remember the basis of my powers. I know you believe I can do whatever I want, but it is not true. I know the legal basis of my powers. To use my extraordinary powers on an issue, it has to be relevant to peace stabilization as defined by Dayton . I cannot prevent anybody from making a stupid or an unwelcome decision. Was it a legal decision? Yes it was, but in my opinion it was not a good one. Still, did I have the powers to prevent it on the basis of it being a threat to peace stabilization in BiH? No, as I had no legal basis for reaction there.

Start: But you also failed to give any support to these two auditors....

Paddy Ashdown: That's absolutely untrue.

Start: As far as we are aware, and we follow the majority of BiH media, there was no official support on your part to these two auditors after their removal?

Paddy Ashdown: Donald Hays clearly indicated, on my behalf, that the decision was wrong and that they had to be kept in positions. I did not have any other legal possibility to act.

Start: Are you aware of the message which the corrupt politicians sent to the public by removing the two auditors? What kind of message is that to all those who want to fight crime and corruption in this country? Some of them are in front of your office just now.

Paddy Ashdown: Of course I am, the same way I am aware of the message that was sent by the sentence against Ante Jelavic. Some people tell me that the untouchables finally became accessible to judiciary. Had we had this interview three years ago and had I told you that Ante Jelavic and Momo Mandic would have been brought to justice and that the elected President, Dragan Covic, would have appeared before the court – you would not have believed me.

Start: Let's go back to Musovic and Kulina. One of your objectives was the independent judiciary. However, not a single case or irregularity established by the two auditors in their reports has been prosecuted?

Paddy Ashdown: You are very Federation oriented.

Start: This has nothing to do with the Federation. We are now speaking about State institutions. If you claim that the judiciary has been reformed and it has not prosecuted any of these cases then we are speaking about cosmetic changes only. In essence, nothing has changed.

Paddy Ashdown: The sentence against Ante Jelavic, Mandic's imprisonment, the prosecution of the biggest human trafficking case is just cosmetics for you? VAT introduction is a cosmetic change? Come on

Start: Those are just individual cases but the corrupted system still functions...

Paddy Ashdown: Of course it does. But I also know you are not so naïve as to believe that the reform of the judiciary and the rule of law can be established within such a short period of time. It took us 200 years to establish what is now called the European standard. Look at all the things we have done in regard to establishing the rule of law: we have reformed the judiciary, established a single judicial and prosecutorial council at the BiH level which is prosecuting the biggest cases of corruption. BiH is the first country in the Balkans, maybe even in Europe, that is prosecuting its war criminals on its own territory and before its own courts. The entire Criminal Procedure Code was drafted by BiH experts. Nobody believed BiH could achieve so much in such a short time. Have we made an impact on the lives of ordinary citizens? No. We must continue. We must ensure the implementation of reforms, change the structure, and change the mindset. Enormous progress has been made not only in the last four years of my mandate but in the ten years since the end of the war. People in Europe did not believe all this would be possible to achieve in such a tight timeframe.

Start: You say that you could not help Kulina and Musovic. Could you help de-certified policemen?

Paddy Ashdown: No, and I explained it a few days ago. Do you want me to repeat it?

Start: No need, but the message that "those fighting crime and corruption are usually left to the mercy of corrupted politicians" somehow lingers?

Paddy Ashdown: That is not the point. Please understand that according to the Dayton Agreement there are three completely separated mandates and each is related to a different area. There cannot be interference of mandates. The mandate of the High Representative is to ensure the stability of peace. NATO, that is IFOR and SFOR, has a mandate relevant to military aspects. The third mandate is related to the IPTF and police reform. All have different responsibilities. The IPTF's mandate is not under my control and I cannot interfere in their responsibilities. Still, I spoke to the Peace Implementation Council about violations of human rights of these policemen, on several occasions.

Start: Why did you refuse the assistance of media, especially of those who did a great job on informing the public and democratizing BiH society? I am referring to the media that investigated and presented numerous cases of corruption and crime.

Paddy Ashdown: We used media assistance a lot, but maybe you did not notice it.

Start: Which media's support did you accept and is it true that you asked the US Embassy to give its approval for a decision that would ban the publishing of the *Slobodna Bosna* and broadcasting of "60 minuta"?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not want to comment on these allegations. We have our own reasons for choosing people who believe in this country. Newspapers in this country have their role, and I believe it is substantial. There are

people who believe I used the High Representative's powers to remove some media due to their criticism of me. I have never done that, as I believe they are very important in this country. I support their existence even if they attack the High Representative. I remember the cover page of, I think, Slobodna Bosna saying "Paddy Will Stop Our Work Next Week", but, you see, this did not happen. We will continue to use media in the fairest of ways, because I believe you are an essential element for this country.

Start: You say you do not react to criticism. But it was you who called the well-respected BiH columnist "a café society" analyst, because of his criticism of you?

Paddy Ashdown: No, I only said it was, as you say it: "*carsija*". If people in Sarajevo can speak about some people from "*carsija*" then I can speak that way too. I am a person governed by my objectives and allow me to say this: when I arrived in this country I made an analysis which has proven to be correct – time is not on BiH's side. The gates of Europe are closing, unless we do this reform fairly quickly. I had only one passion then – to bring this country to Europe. I knew I had to work quickly and hard and sometimes be brutally honest to make it happen. Maybe I stepped on somebody's toes along the way, but it is my job – to bring this country to Europe. As I said, this is not a beauty contest.

Start: To avoid misunderstanding, editors did not give negative marks to your appearance or charm but your work?

Paddy Ashdown: They have a right to their opinion.

Start: If you could select your partners for the implementation of reforms in BiH, who would be your choice?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not choose my partners. This is democracy.

Start: Who are, in your opinion, forces that could implement the necessary reform?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not have that freedom. I do not want to interfere in politics, that is not my job. I do not think it is a secret now – I am a liberal. I was unemployed for five years because I am liberal and the conservatives did not want to give me a job. I have been a liberal my whole life. I cannot view this war in any other way but as a liberal. You do not have to go very far to see where my sympathies lay, but I cannot, as an IC official, indulge the luxury of speaking about it and interfering in your democratic system. There was a time when the International Community selected its favourites and established them in power, it might very well be that it was the right thing to do then. But you now live in a democracy and have to make your own decisions. Forgive me for not telling you who would be my partners because I do not choose them – you do.

Start: It is not true that you did not interfere in the elections. The removal of Nikola Grabovac from the position of Minister of Finance was a huge blow to the Alliance. Grabovac had a very important role in the removal of parallel financial flows that were enabling further division of BiH.

Paddy Ashdown: The fact that you call yourself a non-nationalist does not entitle you to act illegally, as happened with Nikola Grabovac. I tried to establish European principles that Ministers have to take responsibility for what happens in their Ministry. If you cannot accept that principle, you cannot be a European country. Grabovac was the first person in this country to whom I said – the scandal took place in your Ministry and you are responsible for it. The fact that you belong to the Alliance does not mean that you can avoid your responsibility as a Minister in the Government. That is very dangerous territory because you are telling me that some acts of mismanagement have to be forgiven to some individuals only because they belong to a political option which you prefer.

Start: But no charges were brought against him and these, as you call them, acts of mismanagement have not been proven.

Paddy Ashdown: I said very clearly that it was necessary at the time. As soon as it was no longer necessary, the removed officials returned to public life. I applied the same principle to Grabovac and Sarovic. So, I should not have applied it to Sarovic?

Start: Sarovic is in prison now, Grabovac is not. There are no charges against him even.

Paddy Ashdown: That is not important.

Start: How do you mean, not important?

Paddy Ashdown: Sarovic was responsible for the Orazo affair, because he was the President at the time. That has nothing to do with the current charges that came later on. You are saying that I should not have removed Grabovac because he comes from a political party that you like, but that Sarovic had to be removed because he represents a political party that you dislike.

Start: Grabovac has not been prosecuted. What happened to Grabovac can also be called rumours, the same you said about Andan and “only rumors” in his case...

Paddy Ashdown: Those were not rumors. It was the customs scandal which took place when Grabovac was the Minister of Finance responsible for customs. This scandal cost this country 1.7 million KM. There were no charges against Sarovic when I removed him. He was a responsible official at the time when the Orazo affair happened. Don't you want to have a country where Ministers and authorities are held accountable for actions they should have stopped, but failed to do so?

Start: At the beginning of your mandate you and your partners started the famous Bulldozer campaign, put helmets on your heads and took symbolic photos beside civil engineering machinery. How satisfied are you with the results of this Campaign, four years later?

Paddy Ashdown: Economic growth is bigger than growth in any country in the Balkans, and I am surprised that you did not consider these results earlier. Fifty laws were enacted in three months and hundred and fifty in the second mandate. Previous communist laws that were slowing down the economic growth were revoked. At the beginning of the Campaign you needed a hundred days to launch a business in this country. Now you need fourteen days.

Start: We had terrible privatization and there is a real danger that the situation may deteriorate even further. The aforesaid successes only seem great because we had a very low base and every progress therefore seems enormous.

Paddy Ashdown: I agree that we started from a low base. I also agree that we have a long journey ahead of us. But who could have predicted this four years ago? Four years ago the majority of people said that the withdrawal of international funds would lead to collapse in BiH. That did not happen. I was among the first people who said that the first part of the privatization process had been done very badly, but those things are now improving. However, that is not the role of OHR. It is a task for the IMF and World Bank.

Start: You said that at the beginning of your mandate only a few predicted that things would look like this in four years. We have to admit that we did not expect it either...

Paddy Ashdown: Thank you!

Start: We expected them to be much better...

Paddy Ashdown: Ohooooohooooooo....

Start: All this lasts for far too long and nothing is changing...

Paddy Ashdown: I believe you and I have sympathy for your impatience. This country needs more impatient people and more impatient politicians. I understand ordinary people, but you have to understand just how far you have reached. I know that the press has the role of painting it black, but the negative view that comes out of it is not useful. In ten years you have moved further than my country, Northern Ireland, in 25 years. It took years to build BiH after the war. I know it does not give jobs or pensions to people ... but ten years after the war you are at the gates of Europe.