Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH:”Politicians would sign a statement, not constitutional changes!”

High Representative Paddy Ashdown confirmed exclusively for “Večernji” that BiH politicians gathered in Washington would be offered to sign a “statement” committing themselves to implementation of constitutional reforms. “Večernji” wrote about this several times, but there was no official confirmation of that.

In a telephone interview from Washington , asked whether the parties would agree on the proposals for constitutional reform, Ashdown replied:

Paddy ASHDOWN: The answer to this question concerns them entirely, not me or the International Community. Even two years ago I began saying that the next phase would require that Bosnia and Herzegovina become much more efficient and spend much more money on citizens and much less on politicians. That’s why I expected Mr Hays to achieve a consensus among the local politicians.

Vecernji List: What is of key importance in these talks in your opinion?

Paddy ASHDOWN: The key is that politicians ask themselves whether the Dayton state can survive in this form. Dayton ensured peace, but it is time now for it to be changed and ensure a European model state. Therefore, it is very important that Stage Two begins during the Washington negotiations. It

is also very important that politicians commit themselves to continue the process in order for this country to become more effective, which could happen only after the next election.

Vecernji List: What paper was prepared for the politicians in Washington?

Paddy ASHDOWN: The most important thing is for them to sign a paper committing themselves to continue to participate in the process of implementation of constitutional reform. It will be a statement of intent to participate in this process. Some other steps are expected, too, related to this process. The paper I expect to be signed will be a clear sign of commitment of local politicians to make BiH more functional.

Vecernji List: Will this "progress" on the issue of constitutional changes have an impact in terms of changing the views of the International Community with regard to downsizing the role of the OHR?

Paddy ASHDOWN: This won't be decided on in Washington . A decision on that has already been made. When I came here three years ago, I said I wanted to help Bosnia and Herzegovina join Europe . I also sent a message then that I wanted the mission of the High Representative to end. Now that Bosnia and Herzegovina will go towards realization of the SAA, and I'm certain it will complete this process by October 2006, it is very probable that BiH won't have a High Representative. I made that recommendation to the International Community anyway.

Vecernji List: What does it depend on now?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Let me repeat, it's got nothing to do with Washington . I expect from the US capital a readiness for implementation of constitutional changes. The sooner this is done, the sooner BiH goes under Europe 's wing.

Vecernji List:You pointed out in Dayton on the occasion of

marking the 10th anniversary of Dayton that BiH has no future without Croats?!

Paddy ASHDOWN: The Croat people, with their culture, ethnic identity, is an inseparable part of Bosnia and Herzegovina . If there are no Croats, if they are not protected and recognizable, then there surely won't be a Bosnia and Herzegovina . Dayton created a framework for preservation of a multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina and all the three peoples are crucial for its existence. Croats are the strongest economically. Of course, they need to be given space and assurance of preserving their own ethnic identity, culture, religion and language. Croats, on the other side, must do their part and take the role that belongs to them. I must point out that Croats must not be blinded and must not lead themselves into a dark corner, they simply must take part in these processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina . This is the interest of the Croat people in BiH. Failure to go to Washington isn't the best way to respond to these challenges and realize the interests of one's own people.

Vecernji List: So you don't consider mature the decision of Croat officials such as Čović, Cardinal Puljić or the opposition leader Zubak, who sort of boycotted Washington?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Those were your words.

Vecernji List: But you criticized their absence, nevertheless?!

Paddy ASHDOWN: I understand Croat frustrations and it's very important that Croats feel comfortable in Bosnia and Herzegovina . It's very important that the state of BiH takes steps to protect Croat interests. But simply, the best way to achieve this isn't absenting oneself from talks or being isolated from discussions on the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina . While the future of BiH is being discussed in Washington I don't think that absenting themselves they are

helping the interests of the Croat people.

Vecernji List: What is your comment with regard to remarks we could hear from the Croat side about the framework of constitutional changes leading to centralization of BiH?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Those who are saying that should have taken part in the negotiations. A boycott is not the best way to show your positions. Those are legitimate requests and views, but if you remain at the side, no one is going to hear you.

Vecernji List: What is your comment with regard to the calls for a third entity, those we could hear in the recent days?

Paddy ASHDOWN: You should be thinking about the future, not the past. You must go onwards, not backwards.

Vecernji List: But we have the RS from the past?

Paddy ASHDOWN: That is a constitutional category of Bosnia and Herzegovina .

Vecernji List: Is it not time for its change?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Yes, it is time for change. But how this is done is definitely up to political representatives of BiH and not any more up to international officials. Therefore, it’s very important that representatives of the three peoples agree on that. I will not rule out any solution. Still, the most important thing is that this is achieved by agreement and that BiH becomes more functional.

Vecernji List: What do you think of the proposal of BiH bishops about four regions?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I did not take part in this discussion and repeat it is up to local officials.

Vecernji List: Do you believe in the BiH’s future soon in EU?

Paddy ASHDOWN: Absolutely. No one in the world could believe

that BiH would make such brilliant progress after the war. The worst is behind us and if we have gone this far I am convinced that the final efforts can be made in order to make this happen.