

Interview: High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: “Nationalist Parties Cannot Take BiH into European Union”

Nationalist parties cannot take Bosnia-Herzegovina into the European Union, says Paddy Ashdown, High Representative of the International Community for Bosnia-Herzegovina. He added that BiH could not join the EU before it got rid of nationalism.

“I believe that the current BiH authorities cannot take it through the door to the EU, because we have come very close to that door. I do not think that they can complete that journey. It cannot be completed without decent opposition parties. Several strong opposition parties are needed because you cannot complete this journey to the EU unless the country gets rid of nationalism,” Ashdown says.

NN: Why do you allow BiH to be a hostage of the SDS and the failed policy of Dragan Čavić, whom you declared a reformist, and who stopped the talks on police reform?

Paddy ASHDOWN: It would be better to pose that question to yourself. You elected them. Not you personally, but the citizens elected them. Some say that I am a person who goes hand in hand with the nationalists. That is not true. I go hand in hand with reforms. I am a democrat and I have to work with the people the citizens elected. I believe that it is a tragedy that we have nationalist governments, I fought nationalists all my life, [but] they carried out the reforms that have taken us to the gates of the EU. The armed forces, indirect taxation are at the state level, but it is a tragedy

that all this will be worth nothing unless we achieve an agreement on police reform.

NN: So the citizens of BiH are hostages of reformists like Dragan Čavić, because currently we cannot move on?

Paddy ASHDOWN: You said that. The question is who brought the SDS to power. They managed to get the most votes. On the other hand, the SNSD and the other parties are in the opposition and they cannot forgive the citizens for not having elected them. I personally would prefer to work with reformists, but they are not the people who were elected. Vlašić would not be successful without the opposition parties, whose views were exceptionally constructive and courageous.

NN: Why don't you remove Dragan Čavić from politics?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I would prefer not to name the main obstruction, because there were obstructions on all sides. It would be inaccurate to say that only one party was the obstruction. I have no authority to impose the needed changes. If Bosnia-Herzegovina wishes to join the EU, then politicians must take over responsibility and explain to the citizens why they took their European dream away from them.

NN: You said that in European capitals the question is being asked what should be done with the RS after the politicians from this Entity rejected the proposals on police reform.

Paddy ASHDOWN: I speculated that that question could be asked. I cannot say with certainty whether that was the case, but I believe that in the EU countries they asked what game the RS was playing.

NN: What do you expect the western European governments to do?

Paddy ASHDOWN: There is only one group of people who can do something. Those are the RS politicians. Neither I, nor anybody else can do anything – but the RS politicians.

Legally, my powers are limited by the Dayton Peace Agreement. It is far more important that the EU said that, if BiH wanted to join, the reform had to be carried out by local politicians. If you want the citizens of this country to start dreaming their European dream again, then you don't have to look to the EU capitals or the High Representative. You need to look to Banja Luka and the RSNA.

NN: Why do RS parties keep rejecting police reform?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I understand that this is a difficult issue for them. All reforms were far more difficult for the RS than the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. There is an element of fear and that needs to be acknowledged. I think that this is fear about the disappearance of Republika Srpska, which the politicians created intentionally. It is a lie that there are secret plans for the abolition of the RS. I repeat: it is a complete lie. In the RS there is a fear that there is a hidden agenda, but that is not true. The Federation parties made great concessions in order to accommodate Republika Srpska. It was planned to establish the positions of a deputy director and the Police Board, which shows that Sarajevo cannot impose decisions on Banja Luka. Most people understand that this is difficult, but it has to be done. It is true that it is a much bigger threat for the RS if this Entity is the last barrier between BiH and the EU. I hope that the RS will understand. We can make it easier for the RS, but we cannot do anything unless they show a readiness to go on with the reform process. Experts say that the borders of police areas would cross the IEBL in only three or four places. That has to be accepted because that is the way to ensure the functionality of police.

NN: How long will you wait for the RS to show readiness to continue with the police reform?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I believe that the RS has to be given space to reconsider the situation in which we are. It is time to act calmly and leave space for the situation to be reconsidered.

On Monday the RSNA can give a mandate to its politicians to negotiate a solution that would lead to success. On Monday I will be in London , attending a major conference, which will be discussing the role of the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Like Dragan Čavić, I want the Office of the High Representative to grow into the EUSR Office. But, you cannot have an EUSR if you are not on the way to the EU. This is a very important conference, but what the RSNA will say on Monday is equally important. If they give a mandate to their politicians, then we can overcome this obstacle.

NN: What is your optimism – that the police reform could go on – based on, if the talks have failed?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I am not an optimist.

NN: Then why do you believe that the RS politicians can change their mind?

Paddy ASHDOWN: I don't, and I do not know whether they can. I am not an optimist. But the reward is huge if they do. And if they don't, the punishment is a halt of investments, of new jobs, of the visa-free regime... Republika Srpska becomes a small black hole of obstructionists, which keeps the whole region back. That is a dangerous position. Not in the sense of international pressure but because of the situation which the citizens of BiH will come into.

NN: Is that an announcement of sanctions against the RS?

Paddy ASHDOWN: There are no sanctions. I will not take any sanctions. I don't have to, because the sanctions will be taken by international investors in the region of the Western Balkans. Of course they will not [invest] in a country which is not headed towards the EU.

I have not felt any pressure from Belgrade on RS

NN: Have you felt any pressure from Belgrade on the RS negotiators during the police reform talks?

Paddy ASHDOWN: No, I have not felt any pressure. Serbia and Montenegro are on the way to the EU. They will not be looking back in order to save Banja Luka . The longer the RS waits, the weaker their negotiating position will be. In the Konak residence in Sarajevo , the RS negotiators could have discussed an increase of salaries for the policemen in that Entity or the move of the seat of SIPA to Lukavica. This position becomes weaker and weaker every day.