

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, at the Press Conference on the Removal of President Covic

It is with deep regret that I have had to call this press conference today, to announce that I have decided that I have no option but to require Dr Covic to step down from his position as a member of the BiH Presidency with immediate effect.

I informed Dr Covic of this decision in a personal meeting a few moments ago.

This has been probably the most difficult I have had to make. And it is a decision I make with great regret.

But I am very clear that it is the right decision.

In a moment I will explain why this decision was necessary.

But let me first of all explain what were not among the reasons for this decision.

I am not asking Dr Covic to stand down because he has been a bad President. On the contrary. He has been, by and large, I believe, a good President.

Nor is it because he has been opposed to the European reform process. On the contrary. He has shown himself committed to reform both inside the HDZ and in Government – and, in at least one case, defence, he contributed decisively to the successful outcome of the reform process in BiH.

Nor is this in any way intended to be, as some claim, an attack on all Croats in BiH. This is not about diminishing any individual or constituent people – it is about upholding the highest standards in politics – and nothing else.

Nor is it because there is any question that Dr Covic enjoys the presumption of innocence. Whether Dr Covic is found innocent or guilty of the very serious charges for which he now stands indicted before the BiH courts is a matter for the courts to decide, no-one else.

Dr Covic is entitled to the presumption of innocence like any ordinary citizen.

But he is not any ordinary citizen.

He holds one of the highest executive offices in the land and this requires adherence to standards which are higher than for any ordinary citizen.

However good he may have been in his position, the interests of one person cannot be allowed to stand above the integrity and reputation of the country's institutions.

This is a principle which has been established for some years now in BiH. It requires anyone who is indicted for criminal offences, while holding high executive authority, to stand down from their post in order to defend themselves as a private citizen, so as not to damage the public office they hold.

This is the principle applied and accepted in a number of vetting decisions over the last few years when individuals who were being considered for high executive office were specifically informed that, if they were indicted, they would be required to stand down.

It was the principle applied to and accepted by Mila Gadzic, who was indicted and subsequently stepped down from her

position as Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations in the State Government on 12 August 2003.

It was the principle applied to and accepted by Mirko Sarovic, even though the details of the allegations against him were different.

It was the principle applied to Milorad Dodik, when, in December last year, he expressed an interest in being the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska and I had to tell him that, since he was subject to an indictment, this was not a position which would be open to him.

In short, this principle has been applied and accepted over a number of years to a considerable number of individuals from all parties and all ethnicities.

I can see no reason why Dr Covic should be an exception to this rule. It would be unreasonable and unjust to those to whom this principle has already been applied, if we started to apply exceptions at this stage in BiH's development.

I want now to use this opportunity to make some general points about the importance of this policy to BiH.

Let me make it clear, however, that these are about the policy in general. They are not intended in any way to undermine or place in question the presumption of innocence to which Dr Covic is, without reservation, entitled.

First, why is this principle of resignation from high executive office in the case of a confirmed indictment so important to BiH?

After all, as some have pointed out, it is a principle applied in some, but not all, Western democracies.

So why should it be applied here in BiH?

The answer to that is simple.

Unlike many Western democracies which have long histories, well founded stability and the established trust of their citizens, Bosnia and Herzegovina's democracy is still very fragile, its peace not yet fully secured and its institutions in their infancy after a terrible war only decade ago.

The truth is, as we all know, that BiH's institutions still have to win the trust of their citizens.

And one of the reasons for that distrust, as every citizen knows, is the dangerously close connection between criminality and politics, as well as the high levels of corruption in BiH's political structures and governmental institutions.

None of this is to say that any individual is guilty of the indictments laid against them.

It is merely to assert that, if BiH is to win the trust of its citizens, without which no secure form of Government or stable peace can be established, then, in choosing which standards are appropriate to BiH, only the highest will do.

And that standard is the standard that has been applied for a number of years; that, though a person holding high executive office is entitled to the presumption of innocence which is every citizen's right, they should defend themselves as private citizens so as not to damage the integrity of the office they hold.

I believe this policy is not only right – I also believe it has widespread public support.

And there is another reason why holding to this principle, however difficult, is so important to BiH's future.

Next year, after the 2006 elections, the winning political parties will have to consider whom they choose for high government positions. Perhaps the fact that politicians' immunity is now severely limited and that we have held to the

principle of resignation in the case of criminal indictment will cause political parties to think twice about putting forward for high office individuals who have a questionable past or close connections with the criminal world.

If so, then this would be the biggest step ever taken to cleaning up BiH politics and would open the way to new, younger and cleaner hands to take over the government of this country.

I have tried so far to explain why the general principle I am applying to Dr Covic today is so important for the country and its future.

Now I want to turn to the specific case of Dr Covic.

Under BiH's Constitution, the Presidency has exclusive responsibility for the conduct of Foreign Affairs, including representing BiH in international and European fora and seeking membership of the same. This is a most serious and onerous responsibility. BiH is more dependent than most countries in the world on the support of the international community.

That support, like citizens' trust in BiH's institutions, is fragile. But without it, the country's economy and the welfare of its citizens would collapse. And the stability of the peace could be threatened.

And on the foreign affairs front, the months ahead are vital ones for BiH.

This country faces a crucial decision to be taken, possibly in April, on its future in NATO and PfP.

And it is likely that in May, or shortly thereafter, the European Commission will decide whether BiH can progress down the long road that leads to full European membership.

And if, as I hope, the answer to that is yes, then there will

be months of detailed tough international negotiations ahead with the European Union, and on other matters with other countries, for which the Presidency has overall political responsibility.

Yet BiH's key international partners on the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board have made their position crystal clear with respect to Dr Covic.

They have unanimously called on him to step down. And they have made it clear that if he did not do so, then they could not have any contact with him while he remained under indictment.

To have a member of the Presidency – the body which is in charge of foreign policy – with whom BiH's main international partners will not have contact, could do real and lasting damage to BiH's immediate and long-term future.

But this, of course, would be much worse if Dr Covic were to become Chairman of the Presidency in June this year.

In these circumstances, Dr Covic's remaining in office is an impediment which cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the country's future at such a crucial time.

I had hoped that Dr Covic would see that his remaining in office while he defends himself before the courts was inimical to the best interests of the office he holds, of the people he represents, and of the country at large. I had hoped that he would strike a blow for higher standards in political life by resigning voluntarily, so paving the way for an honourable political return if, in due course, he is acquitted.

That is why I was keen that he should have full and ample time to consider his position in dignity and to listen to the many powerful voices urging him to step down.

But he has chosen not to do so.

So, now, I must consider my responsibilities in this matter.

I am specifically charged by the PIC with ensuring the smooth running of the common institutions of BiH so that the country can move forward without impediment and stability can be entrenched. Indeed, it was precisely the need to ensure the smooth running of the common institutions, which lay behind the creation of the Bonn Powers all those years ago.

In these circumstances, I had no option but to take the decision which I have taken today, requiring Dr Covic to relinquish his position in the Presidency.

However, the reason for this decision relates only to the damage which I believe that Dr Covic's remaining in the Presidency will do to that institution. There is nothing either in Dr Covic's present situation or in his past actions, which leads me to believe that his wider political activities are any threat to the stability or development of BiH. For this reason, my decision applies to Dr Covic's position in the Presidency only, and does not apply to his activities in the HDZ. What positions he may continue to hold, or what new positions he will take up within the HDZ in the next election year, is therefore a matter solely for the HDZ and not for me.

Similarly, how and when the vacant position left by Dr Covic in the Presidency is filled, and by whom, is a matter solely for the constitutional and democratic procedures of BiH.

I have taken this decision with deep regret, but in the clear knowledge that this is the right thing for BiH and its future.