

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in BiH and Special Representative of the EU: “Croat Politicians in BiH Act in a Way Reminiscent of Minorities in Former Yugoslavia”

Paddy Ashdown has faced increasing criticism from the media lately. Even *Vecernji list* criticized him “but this criticism was fair”, the High Representative said. He admitted to making a mistake or two in doing his job, which on those occasions justified the criticism. At the start of the interview, we discussed the make-up of BiH.

VL: According to some predictions, negotiations on constitutional change in BiH should start in the Spring with representatives of the three constituent peoples discussing the future make-up of BiH?

ASHDOWN: No one said these negotiations would begin in the Spring. I’m reluctant to have this serious issue on the agenda before this country obtains membership in European institutions.

VL: Why?

ASHDOWN: Once we pass this door we will have European and NATO structures in place, which will then facilitate a safe environment and structure for discussions about these very serious issues. In addition, I have to note the issue of the make-up of BiH will have to be resolved, even without direct involvement of the International Community.

VL: I assume that the concept at the centre of these discussions will be the creation of the State without an expensive state apparatus?

ASHDOWN: Yes. A state that spends 65 percent of money on financing its own structures and only 35 percent on citizens, as is the case in BiH, cannot survive. That is why pensions are so low, health services substandard, schools in such catastrophic shape, and salaries for judges so improper.

VL: So, the objective will be to follow the model of some normally functioning countries, such as, for example, Great Britain or France ?

ASHDOWN: BiH cannot have the same make-up as France or Great Britain , but it may have a similar make-up to that of Belgium or Switzerland . We can organize BiH in such a manner as to have a more flexible power structure on the State level, and then trickle down competencies to the local level.

VL: I assume it will be easy to reach a consensus on these two levels of authority, i.e. the State and municipal levels. If they prove insufficient for the make-up of BiH, what other levels do you envisage?

ASHDOWN: This is the key problem for the make-up of BiH. What should be in between the State and municipalities?! Perhaps, we could agree that there shouldn’t be anything in the middle. In that case, we would have the State and municipal levels of authority. If this were unacceptable, then perhaps the Entity or cantonal level of authority would be a solution. However, this decision does not rest with the International Community, but with the people of this country.

VL: This means there won’t be any Dayton 2?

ASHDOWN: Exactly, there won’t be any Dayton 2. Citizens of BiH will make constitutional changes by means of mutual agreement. It is their task, not ours, and it has to be agreed upon by all three peoples. The International Community cannot impose it. Similarly, one people cannot impose a solution on the other two peoples, nor can two peoples impose their solution on the third. Everyone has to agree to it, and this cannot be delayed indefinitely.

VL: Although Croats in BiH have the image of those who don’t want BiH, the facts speak differently. For instance, when discussing the issue of constitutional change Serbs will not want to relinquish Republika Srpska, and Bosniaks will not want to give up on the Federation? Hence, it is they who want the partition of BiH, and not Croats? Where did Croats go wrong in creating their image toward the International Community?

ASHDOWN: They haven't gone wrong anywhere, and I find your evaluation imprecise. Serbs think that the policy of the International Community is targeted against them. Bosniaks also have their own objections whereas I am completely blind to this issue of ethnicity. Croats, as the least numerous, have a justified fear that they'll be marginalized in one way or the other. I think it's entirely wrong to say we are targeting Croats. Perhaps, Serbs feel this kind of pressure a bit more than others. BiH cannot be a proper state unless all three peoples feel comfortable in their own homeland.

VL: I didn't mean that the International Community was against Croats, but why do Croats generally have such a negative image in the eyes of the International Community?

ASHDOWN: And my intention was to tell you that your image in the eyes of the International Community was better than the image of RS. I'm telling you, Croats don't have a bad image as far as I'm concerned.

VL: What is your impression about Croat politics in BiH? What is their objective?

ASHDOWN: I don't want to be too critical, but if I understand some Croat representatives well, it seems to me that their preference is for a model of Yugoslavia with minority rights. I think it would be wiser to take advantage of agreements on constitutional amendments, and to work on implementing the rights specified in constitutional amendments in practice.

Some in the RS Army are Helping the Fugitives

VL: You have been on a long trip to the US and Europe . I suppose you have tried to bring BiH closer to Euro-Atlantic integration on this occasion?

ASHDOWN: It is not the High Representative who's brought BiH closer to Euro-Atlantic integration, it is the citizens of BiH and their authorities. I have no intention of hiding the fact that I've talked to my international colleagues reminding them of the level of progress, which BiH has made recently. Now, there is only one thing ahead of us and ahead of the door which takes us to NATO's waiting room, and as you know, this is cooperation with the ICTY. If we accomplish this, the road ahead will be clear.

VL: Why are you so optimistic?

ASHDOWN: I'm optimistic about the ability of the country to meet European standards, but I'm not so optimistic about the RS doing what it should be doing to prove its cooperation with the Hague . What concerns me the most is that it's not only a matter of individual obstructionism in RS, but there's more to it. I tend to believe more and more that Carla del Ponte was right when she said, speaking before the Security Council, that one had to address systemic issues in the RS security structures.

There are some in the RS Army who believe their duty is to hide persons indicted for war crimes, particularly in relation to recent events concerning Ratko Mladic, rather than to arrest them. I'm also very concerned about these problems.

DEPARTURE OF THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE

I'll be Leaving BiH Next Year

VL: Last time when we met you said you promised to your wife that you'd be leaving BiH next year. You are a faithful husband, aren't you?

ASHDOWN: My wife and I love this country very much. People here are kind to us and it's been a pleasure to live in Bosnia and Herzegovina . However, my wife was right when she said it was time for us to go. So, the end of next year will be the time of my departure from Bosnia and Herzegovina .

VL: Will you be the last High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina ?

ASHDOWN: This will be decided by the International Community. My international employers will decide whether there will be any High Representatives in the future, but I can tell you, if there are any, their role will be very different from mine because now is the time to transfer power to BiH authorities, and at the same time reduce the level of our involvement. I try to work in accordance with these principles. Last year, I used the Bonn powers only

on two occasions to impose laws. Compared with the figure of 70 impositions from the preceding year, I hope this wasn't much. This trend will continue in the future. The time is now for you to act, and not for us.

VL: In spite of what you've just said, occasionally you appear very strict?

ASHDOWN: I'm making a distinction between sanctions against individuals and the imposition of laws. This is democracy, and I should be imposing laws only on very rare occasions. This should be done by the Parliament. As far as individuals are concerned, I have to take measures when the whole country is hostage to their actions. This is unpleasant, but it's a part of my job.

About Dr. Dragan Covic

Dragan Covic is an honest man in my view

VL: Croat officials claim that international and domestic court proceedings are deliberate attempts to weaken their influence?

ASHDOWN: What the courts are doing has nothing to do with me. I neither want to nor can interfere in their work. We must have strong and independent courts free from the interference of the High Representative and politicians. What I know for sure is there is a wrong perception, which is deliberately disseminated by some, that activities of the State Court are targeting Croats. The facts speak for themselves, namely all those suspected of violating the law are on trial. The first major case before the State Court was against a Serb, the major case of trafficking in people in BiH, the second case also against a Serb – Mandic, the third against a Bosniak – Fazlic. The view which claims that only Serbs and Croats are targeted by the Court is absurd.

VL: The problem with this is that Croats believe these proceedings have been framed. For instance, Croats have been convicted and imprisoned for the murder of Jozo Leutar. Eventually, it turns out that innocent people have been imprisoned. And no one suffers any consequences for making this mistake. Well, even the most recent phase of the proceedings against Jelavic indicates there is no sufficient evidence.

ASHDOWN: I cannot comment on Leutar case because it happened long before my time, and concerning Jelavic neither I nor you can tell whether he's guilty or not. This is a matter for the Court to decide. What I can tell you about Jelavic case for sure is that this is not a political process, but a trial for corruption.

VL: The case of Dragan Covic is also in the focus?

ASHDOWN: I cannot talk about Dragan Covic. It is a matter for the judiciary. Personally, I'll be very direct and tell you, as far as I'm concerned, Dragan Covic is an honest, truthful and straightforward partner in the reform process.

However, no politician can be above the law. If a politician, whether good or bad, operates outside of the legal frame he will pay a price for that.

Intelligence Services in the Hands of Politicians

VL: Do you have the impression that secret services are laughing behind SFOR's back by sending false messages about the whereabouts of Karadzic and Mladic? When will these services be disentangled from the control of different figures with political power?

ASHDOWN: In the whole of the Balkans, in all former Communist countries, we have such politically-controlled services. But now, we have OSA and it's been established in accordance with the best European standards, and it is the first service of its kind in the Balkans under the parliamentary supervision. It is composed of representatives of all three parties, which have an absolute right to supervise them. However, this does not mean that we have eliminated old intelligence services from the scene. I would suggest to *Vecernji list* and other media to exert pressure on parliamentarians to take this duty seriously. I think we have given them instruments to take control over the intelligence service.

VL: Are intelligence services or your services capable of finding out how the five, and some even say nine billion dollars in donations for BiH have been spent?

ASHDOWN: I'm afraid that the International Community failed to set the rule of law as a priority in BiH from the

very beginning. We set it as a priority only two years ago. So, I'm afraid that money intended to help citizens of BiH has simply gone through the system ending up in the hands of criminals, with some of them now being in power. In those cases where we can act against such individuals, we will act. But 8-9 years afterwards, is it in fact feasible to know what has happened to money donated by a certain country?