

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative and EU Special Representative for BiH: “I have no intention of abolishing the Republika Srpska”

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The Decision of Lord Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH, taken in early July, to remove ten key officials of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), and to conditionally exclude from political life an additional 50 members of the same party, was perceived in Republika Srpska not only as an attempt to destroy Karadzic's former party, but also to render the further existence of RS irrelevant. Asked whether this decision will lead to abolishment of RS, Lord Ashdown responded for NIN:

No. It's not my intention to abolish Republika Srpska. Even if I wanted to abolish Republika Srpska, I would not be able to do it because my job is to apply international law and the Dayton Agreement and both protect the existence of the RS, but were the RS to fail to uphold international law then this could undermine that protection. It's not my job to attack Serbs or any political party for that matter.

NIN: So, abolishing the RS is not one of the options?

Paddy Ashdown: Not unless people in the RS are in favor of it.

NIN: Say, for instance, they spontaneously ask for a referendum on the abolishment of RS?

Paddy Ashdown: Perhaps, it will be a referendum, and perhaps, even without a referendum; in ten, twenty or fifty years, this country may become one single state without the entities. What's really important is that such an outcome be a reflection of the will of RS population. I believe that as this country is making progress, it will get closer to Europe, and any divisions will disappear as they disappeared in Europe. However, that's the future, and not the present.

But, many people are frightened and confused by your decision, which has serious consequences for development and the essence of the democratic process and stability in BiH?

Did you ask yourselves why pensions in the Federation have a pension twice the size of pensioners in the RS? Why most of the investments go to the Federation rather than the RS? Why the eastern part of the RS is the most backward region in the country?

It is because you support and help Karadzic, and as long as that's the case, you won't be getting anything in the future either. It is crucial for you to understand that this country has got only one future, namely Europe and NATO. I can't allow that this future be destroyed by a handful of corrupt individuals who believe they can fill their pockets with gold, while protecting and supporting the war criminals.

NIN: Who do you have in mind in particular?

Paddy Ashdown: Those individuals affected by my decision who now fake surprise.

Why do you think there shouldn't be any space for surprise when the international, Federation and local authorities still

tolerate so many damaging factors in BiH?

I understand that people are angry, believing all this is undemocratic, and perhaps I would feel the same way if I were in their position, but I can't accept that they are surprised. In early January I invited Dragan Cavic, Dragan Kalinic and Dragan Mikerevic to sit with me at this table because they had done some truly outstanding things last year. I told them then: "You, more than all the others, you and no one else, the people of the RS, have been farsighted enough to trigger new possibilities for BiH by changing the taxation system, reforming the armed forces and so on. You have managed to open the gates of Europe and NATO, and now there is only one task ahead of you – cooperation with the ICTY. Please, don't put yourself in position of the stone that would prevent the whole country from realizing its future."

NIN: And they failed even to try to follow your advice?

Paddy Ashdown: Six months have elapsed, and they've done nothing. I myself don't know how many times I warned them, either publicly or privately, that if they put themselves in such a position, I would have to take determined action. That's what I ultimately did with this decision. What in the world were they thinking? Perhaps that I wasn't a man who kept to his word? Or someone who failed to act on his promises? Indeed, it doesn't matter whether Paddy Ashdown fulfills his promises or not. What's important is for you to understand that if this country has no future in Europe, then it has no future whatsoever. There would be no investments, jobs and generally nothing for Serbs, Bosniacs or Croats. You would all live at the bottom of the black hole as prisoners of your own stupidity and in constant fear that the war could be triggered again. Should I allow for this to happen because of a handful of individuals? Of course not.

It's in the general interest of everyone in BiH that the process of political democratization be strengthened

intensively. It seems that your most recent decision has significantly jeopardized this process because someone must have voted for all those people whom you removed?

Excuse me, do you expect me to say that because of serious political repercussions to my decision I should have allowed these corrupt individuals to act as they please?

Still, you haven't removed one or two individuals, but the RS Assembly Speaker plus 59 individuals.

I had to remove all those who stood in the way. I don't care who they are, or how many of them are there. Yes, those individuals were elected, but at the same time that doesn't give them the right to rob their fellow countrymen, or refuse to fulfill international obligations, and help the war criminals to evade justice.

NIN: Will your decision destabilize BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: Probably yes, but in the long term I have to ask myself: "If RS, after so much time, is not ready to face the fact that it has to cooperate, to fulfill its international obligations, should I be forcing RS do it?" Of course, my response is that I have to do it.

Do you believe that many in BiH share your position on the validity of the decision you passed?

We conducted analyses, surveys, phone polls and we have also tracked what was happening on web-sites and forums, and many of our officials spoke to ordinary people in the field, and they all reached the same conclusion – it had to be done.

NIN: What did ordinary people tell you?

Paddy Ashdown: People said that these corrupt individuals, these thieves, had to leave. They asked why it wasn't done earlier, and they said they were pleased that it had finally happened. In fact, have you seen any public demonstrations

because of the removal of Dragan Kalinic?

No, not really.

I didn't see them either, that's because there were none – which means that people don't believe I've done something unfair.

NIN: Have you heard any opposing views, for instance from people in RS?

Paddy Ashdown: Trust me, there are moderate voices, both inside the SDS and outside of this party, who realize what the RS has to do in the future.

What was the purpose of the conditional removal of 50 officials in RS, i.e. why did you opt for this half-measure? Was it the hope that now under this much pressure they would be keen to establish better cooperation with you in order to remain in their jobs?

Whether those people stay in the institutions or not depends solely on them. I don't see it as a half-measure. By combining punishment and encouragement, I wanted to tell these people: "You should have done everything that was asked of you, you should have fulfilled your international obligations."

NIN: Excuse me, what was the encouraging element?

Paddy Ashdown: There was still some room for them to cooperate with me.

Did you take this decision independently or after consultations with, say the public prosecutor and diplomats, and how important for you was Karadzic's letter to Dragan Kalinic, which directly incriminates the SDS for providing financial support to Karadzic?

I inform the public prosecutor on a regular basis, and we discussed this decision before I took any action. Of course, I

discusses it with international community officials. However, I made this decision independently. As for SDS, I warned them six months ago about my conviction that I had the evidence required for action and about my intentions to take decisive measures if SDS was used for providing financial support to the war criminals. Karadzic's letter is not the only piece of evidence, and forgive me for not being able to discuss the contents of this letter further.

Do you believe that Mr. Kalinic was aware of absolutely everything that was happening?

I don't claim that Kalinic knew about everything that was happening in his party, but I do know the SDS President is the one who's responsible. Perhaps the SDS is such a chaotic party that it's not known who does what. What I can't accept is that SDS and RS authorities haven't done anything in the last nine years to have at least one single war criminal face justice. It's not only about capturing Karadzic and Mladic, but about the overall cooperation with the ICTY. In this concrete case, I have reason to believe that the SDS was actively used as a part of the war criminals network, and that some individuals such as Minister Tasic were sources of funding. The SDS perhaps could not control its flow of finances, or it deliberately adopted such a policy. Whatever the case, I could no longer tolerate it.

NIN: Out of these two, what did finally bury the SDS?

Paddy Ashdown: Based on the recorded material, I couldn't conclude they had any control, but we identified abuse of the law specifying that political parties must not have any relations with private and public companies.

NIN: Are you equally committed to investigating corruption and abuses in the other political parties in BiH, especially those suspected of cooperation with Bin Laden?

Of course. We follow closely the operation of any organization

that has to do with security.

NIN: And that's all you do?

Paddy Ashdown: Very soon several crucial cases on corruption and the other things that you mentioned will be considered by the Court of BiH. I have no reason to hide anything, and we can go public with a pile of materials pointing to the abuse of SDS party funding. However, one should bear in mind that BiH was not rejected at NATO's Summit in Istanbul because of manipulations of party funding, but because of preventing normal life and work in RS. I won't pretend there's no corruption in the funding of other parties, but the difference lies in that only obstruction in the SDS and the RS local authorities is aimed at providing support to individuals indicted of war crimes.

NIN: Still, it's too early to expect from the SDS or the RS portion of the armed forces to arrest Karadzic and Mladic, isn't it? The assumption is that you have more reliable intelligence that may lead to the capture of Karadzic and Mladic?

Paddy Ashdown: See, I don't. It's not a matter for my consideration. My job is peace implementation, and not security.

NIN: Don't you think that more political will is needed to arrest Karadzic and Mladic?

Paddy Ashdown: It is crucial – such political will is needed in the RS and the SDS.

Political will on the part of international community too. There's a concern, especially in SFOR quarters, that the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic would result in casualties, which in turn requires some explaining to the public in the U.S., Great Britain etc.

We'll come to that, but let's first focus on the RS so as to make myself absolutely clear. Kalinic once said that I was forcing him to arrest Karadzic. This is completely wrong. I don't believe that RS authorities are responsible for Karadzic's arrest, and I accept that NATO has sufficient military force to do it. But, the RS is absolutely responsible for refusing to cooperate. Of 29 war criminals apprehended by international forces, RS authorities failed to provide help in the arrest of even one single person. I haven't seen any signs of political indecisiveness amongst the international forces, only indecisiveness in the RS. I mean if I were to be absolutely fair, I would say: "There is no lack of political will, but perhaps of some political coordination in applying the poisoned fruit strategy."

NIN: What's that strategy like?

Paddy Ashdown: You sit under the tree that you have already surrounded with your forces, and you wait for the poisoned fruit to fall into your lap. I don't think it's sufficient, it's not sufficient to shake the tree for it to happen. You have to attack branches, the very root of the tree.

NIN: But, that strategy implies casualties, doesn't it?

Paddy Ashdown: Actually not. Everything that we've done so far was done with the aim of minimizing potential casualties. You have to attack the network that corrupts the system. That's why, for instance, we froze Mandic funds and the accounts of the "Srpske sume" company. We combine political with military action in order to pressure the Karadzic support network. He is not some solitary outlaw hiding in the hills. Karadzic is the head of a deeply corrupt and wide criminal network that robs its own people in order to evade justice.

NIN: Don't you think that it's much wiser to go for the head of the dragon, rather than its tail?

Paddy Ashdown: I don't think it's true. We are cutting off the

dragon's vital organs, taking its brains out and cutting off its limbs to prevent it from moving. An assault isn't the right strategy for Karadzic, and he is not easy to capture because he's not alone and he's hiding in an area where Tito, for more than three years, was able to hide 16,000 partisans against six German divisions. It will be far easier for us to capture Karadzic once all of his supply channels have been cut off. Karadzic's capture is a laborious campaign that requires coordination between political and military forces. You can trust that I know what I'm talking about because I've been in this business for a long time. I chased my first war criminal, then we called them terrorists, through the marshes of Borneo when I was twenty-three. Trust me when I say that, with this decision, I made Karadzic's life much more complicated.

NIN: Do you believe that your decision on the removal of SDS officials has, in a certain indirect way, created more room for head-hunters who could further complicate the security situation in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: I honestly haven't thought about it. Perhaps now, there are more people in the Balkans who wouldn't like to see Karadzic alive before the ICTY, but that is only my own musing based on the observation of different interests.

NIN: Do you know why secret negotiations between Karadzic and officials of the British Intelligence Agency came to nothing?

Paddy Ashdown: I really know nothing of it. I would say it's just another conspiracy theory, as, for instance, the one that he's already in Hague.

NIN: Can the New Serbian President, Miroslav Tadic, be of significant assistance in capturing Karadzic?

Paddy Ashdown: I believe that is a question for Tadic. The election of Mr. Tadic is of huge importance for all of us because he's a true democrat, and it seems that he may be playing a more active role in ensuring constructive

cooperation with the ICTY.