Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative and EUSR for BiH: “Bih Has Left The Dayton Era And Is Entering The Brussels Era”

(Services: Republika Srpska, SCG, Svet)

SARAJEVO, 26 May /SRNA/ The High Representative in BiH, Paddy Ashdown, said today that during the first two years of his mandate, which is to be marked on 27 May, the foundations for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s establishment as a European state on the road to European and Euro-Atlantic structures, have been laid.

According to him, key reforms implemented or undertaken within these two years demonstrate that BiH is “leaving the Dayton era and entering the Brussels era.”

“Had I said two years ago that it was possible to achieve something like this, the majority would have disagreed with me”, stated the International Community’s High Representative, in an interview given to the SRNA and FENA news agencies, marking the second anniversary of his mandate as High Representative.

Ashdown recalled that in his first address he had said that his objective was to put BiH irreversibly on the road to statehood in Europe, adding “we have not achieved this objective, but the progress we have made will be irreversible in many important aspects if BiH begins the Stabilisation and Association Process and enters Partnership for Peace during this year.”

Speaking about key successes in BiH during the past two years, Ashdown referred to the reform of judiciary, the establishment of the Indirect Taxation Authority and “amendments to Dayton passed by the BiH authorities which enabled the establishment of BiH’s the armed forces at the state level.”

“These three steps demonstrate that BiH is leaving the Dayton era and entering the Brussels era. You will see this trend continue and accelerate during the next year,” Ashdown said.

He said that this trend would be obvious in many ways; one of them will be EUFOR troops succeeding SFOR, and the EU taking the formal lead within the International Community’s presence in BiH.

Ashdown added that the focus of his mandate would shift from his role as the International Community’s High Representative, to his role as EU Special Representative.

According to Ashdown, in terms of BiH development, this trend implies a change in the relationship between the international community and BiH’s institutions.

“My objective during the past two years was to steer a rapid, maybe even brutal reform agenda. As soon as BiH has firmly entered mainstream European and Euro-Atlantic integration I think the relationship between the International Community and the BiH authorities will start to change”, said Ashdown.

He said that there was no strategy for the withdrawal of the international community from BiH, there was only a strategy which would integrate BiH into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. The task of the International Community was to support this integration.

“I will let others judge our importance for BiH, but I will say that BiH’s stability is crucial for Europe, so we will maintain our involvement here.” stated the High Representative.

Ashdown said that he did not believe that the day would come when the door of OHR would be locked and the International Community would leave, yet the OHR would soon enter a transitional phase during which it would act less as the Office of the High Representative and more as the Office of the EU Special Representative. He added that OHR would play a less and less interventionist role.

He reiterated that this depended on the pace at which BiH's authorities implement those reforms necessary for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

In answer to the question as to whether or not he still believed that the national parties were capable of implementing the necessary reforms, Ashdown said that he had never made such a statement; rather that he judged parties on their deeds and not on their names and that his obligation was to cooperate with those who were elected by the citizens.

"Many in the opposition and in the press have claimed that it is not possible to achieve anything with these authorities. My job is not to reprimand nor to credit the Governments, yet the fact remains that the door to Europe and to membership of NATO has been opened by this Government, and that this Government, however we might call it, has made some positive changes. At the same time in certain areas it has failed and in others it has not acted fast enough." Ashdown said.

He noted that the economic situation was currently the greatest concern for him and that this was an area where the failures of the Government were the most visible as they have been too slow in implementing reforms such as privatisation, market liberalisation, the law on bankruptcy and removing bureaucratic obstacles through implementation of the reforms proposed by the Bulldozer Commission.

The High Representative stressed that these reforms required time, that for instance in Hungary it took seven years to

start creating new jobs, and that it was impossible to reform an economy and to generate jobs immediately.

“Without economic reforms many jobs will be lost in the future”, Ashdown said.

He concluded that BiH should be irreversibly on the road to “joining the European family” by the end of this year; a step that BiH has been preparing over the past two years.