

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in BiH: “Bosniaks wish to politicise the police and judiciary”

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A day before the European Commission was to publicize its report on the Stabilization and Association Process for the country and the region, the High Representative in BiH, Paddy Ashdown told Dnevni List that he had not seen the report and could not say what the results would be. “But, even if I had, I wouldn’t tell you”, the High Representative says, laughing. He did say he was optimistic, though.

Paddy Ashdown: You must be optimistic in this job and I am optimistic. I’m optimistic because I know how far you’ve gone. It’s impossible to forget that there was a war here ten years ago and that a huge number of people were killed and half of the population lost their homes. Progress towards peace was faster than it was in my own country. If we could achieve so much in several years, I can’t see anything that should prevent us from going the rest of the way to Europe. Long term, I’m an optimist and short-term, a little less so. We must move faster if we want to get into Europe. We must meet the requirements this year to move towards the EU and join PFP. It will be harder if we have more obstruction and delays. We still have a chance. I’m an optimist.

Dnevni list: Critics say that the reforms are slow in implementation, although laws are adopted.

Paddy Ashdown: This isn’t surprising. Implementation is what worries me, too. We’ve been here 18 months. In these 18 months we’ve established state institutions, indirect taxation authority, ministry of defense. We’ve created the frame but haven’t filled it yet. I can say I’m worried, not only because of lack of legislation and creation of institutions but because of implementation, but this is a task we need to accomplish. It’s relatively easy to create the hardware of a state, judicial system, customs, taxation. It’s all hardware, however, we need a lot of time to change the software and that is what you have in your minds. Years will be necessary for people to be able to forget the socialist regime, to create another modern frame of mind which will be suitable for opening markets. Time will be needed that three competing ethnicities turn into one frame of mind, but the first steps are very good and we are on a good road.

Dnevni list: How do you judge the work of local politicians, considering that you came to this position saying that you would judge them by what they do and not by what they say?

Paddy Ashdown: I’d say good and bad. When the International Community sometimes judges BiH it doesn’t realize sometimes what difficulties we are faced here with. The situation is difficult, first of all because of the war that we had here. There was a war and this all came out of the war. So that the frame of mind of these people here is more or less a socialist one. Difficulties also come because of the dysfunctionality of Dayton. It’s not easy to be in power in BiH. Having this in mind, I’d say that these authorities have brought about much change which some thought even impossible. We have a nationalist government. We have three nationalist parties which have opened the door to NATO, introduced reforms, which I believe to be remarkable success. But we still have ethnically based politics. We have problems in the HDZ and SDA coalition. We have a situation that the HDZ, or Croats, resist European standards in education, Bosniaks want politicized police and judiciary and the SDS preserves the situation as it is. If I were very optimistic I’d say that this country has moved further with these authorities than anyone believed was possible, but we haven’t gone far enough to get close to the EU.

Dnevni list: Are you optimistic that the Higher Education Law will be adopted by 31 March as there is a conditionality with World Bank funds?

Paddy Ashdown: I think it needs to be adopted by the parliament by May 7. I can’t say whether I will impose the solution. I never say that, but this is not my job either. It’s up to BiH. If this law isn’t adopted by the parliament, BiH loses 42 million dollars. The World Bank is prepared to allocate 42 million dollars for education in BiH, but international standards must be reached. It’s not about whether the High Representative imposes it or not, it’s about whether BiH will lose the money it needs. BiH politicians, in particular those from the HDZ, must realize they have international obligations they need to meet.

Dnevni list: Criticism that the High Representative has taken more authority than belongs to him by the Dayton Agreement is louder and louder. Is that correct?

Paddy Ashdown: This High Representative has used his powers fewer times than any High Representative before. When I came here I used my powers about 70 times in the first six months, which is roughly the same as my predecessors, but 20 of those were issues that remained from my predecessors. In the second period of six months, I used my powers less often by half that number, in the third six months I used them six times and in the last three months I used them once. It's clear that the number of times the High Representative uses his powers is on the decline. I think it's a good thing and I support it, because we are now approaching the tenth anniversary of Dayton and politicians should feel that it's their duty to accomplish all these issues and what we are doing as the International Community will be scrutinized more and more. This should be a good sign of efficiency of local politicians and I am impatient to come to that stage. If people complain and people always complain, I think it's an element of healthy relations we have now. Those who were the doers in the past and maybe even instructors are now moving into the position of enablers and facilitators, saying "you are doing this and we will help".

Dnevni list: Most criticism comes because many decisions have lately been imposed and conditioned "unless you do this then..."

Paddy Ashdown: Let's be clear, I don't have the money to give away. And I'm not saying that. These are issues implemented by the World Bank or the European Union or the IMF. These are not standards imposed on BiH alone, these are international standards. I don't think people in BiH are right when they complain that the WB points a finger at them telling them they are not doing things right. If you don't want to do things then don't expect us to give you funds. Perhaps we should be stricter. This is the money of tax payers in Britain, Germany, and so on, and they may ask why they should send money to BiH if it's a black hole. Some standards must be established. If they are not established then it's the fault of the local authorities. We must be stubborn when standards are at stake because they are not standards set by the High Representative. Conditions are set by others so that BiH can achieve international standards. By tomorrow, it will be the first time that Moody's, a company representing international standards in investment, will issue an important announcement for BiH, and this is that BiH is in the international register for investors. It's a worldwide register. I think we are the second country in the Balkans to find a place on the list of approved countries for international investment. It's an international standard and it's achievable only when the standard is met and appropriate economic reforms are implemented.

Dnevni list: How much did it help your work to socialize with people, plant peppers...?

Paddy Ashdown: The reason I meet ordinary people in this country is to see what effect my decisions have on their lives. I visited refugees. That's my style, and I can't say whether it helped me or not.

Unified Mostar functions well

Dnevni list: Are you satisfied with the implementation of the imposed structure of Mostar?

Paddy Ashdown: I'm encouraged. We are somewhere halfway through the process and some of the most important moments have passed, but it was hard. I would like to pay tribute to some civil servants at the municipal and city levels who showed professionalism and capability to go into the concrete work of the creation of the city council. I meet them often and they are talented people and they put their professionalism at the service of the city. I pay them tribute for the professionalism with which they did the work. We will see if we can move five ministries to Mostar, create new jobs. I wish to pay tribute to Jahic and Beslic and others who took part in creating the institutions. The interests of the city of Mostar came first, before politics. Now the situation in Mostar is better than before. There's the big issue of the budget in May. I think it will be hard. We are not at the end of the road but halfway through.

Dnevni list: What will happen to the OHR in the near future?

Paddy Ashdown: The institution of the OHR must change because as we go towards Europe the High Representative will be working less and less and BiH politicians more and more. OHR must change into something else.