

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in BiH: “It is not my job to employ unemployed politicians”

“I know it’s difficult when a foreigner judges public opinion in a country he or she comes to, but what citizens think about an issue is important to me. My legitimacy is based on the Dayton Agreement but my powers are based, among other things, on the acceptance by citizens of the job I’m doing. I always ask my associates what citizens think about certain issues. Still, I’ve never been as interested in citizens’ opinions as I was now in the case of Mostar. I did everything in the interest of citizens. Support for what I am doing has also come from politicians; from the SDP, the SDU, the SBiH. They gave encouraging statements and it would be wise politicians from the SDA and the HDZ to react in a similar way. Individuals tried to instill mistrust among citizens for what OHR is doing because in some cases it is in their interest to keep the things as they are. A survey conducted by the Prisma agency indicates that the citizens of Mostar largely support the new structure of Mostar”, said Paddy Ashdown, the International Community’s first man in BiH. in an interview to Dnevni list, one day after imposing the final Statute for the City of Mostar.

To underline his statement, Ashdown shows the results of the Prisma Agency survey conducted on a sample of 1200 Mostarians from all six former municipalities, according to which 72.7% of those asked support the idea of a single city, 85% think politicians spend more money on themselves than on the citizens, while 82.3% say it is wrong for representatives of only one people to run the city administration.

Dnevni list: If the citizens support this structure of Mostar why then such pressure from OHR and a large media campaign for Mostar as a single city?

Paddy Ashdown: Because it’s our duty to explain to citizens how much the municipalities cost. If we didn’t explain, the majority of citizens would not know what the Statute is about. We have evidence that the majority of employees in the municipalities received incorrect information from their politicians and they were concerned over losing their jobs after the adoption of this solution. It was important that we send letters to every one of them to reassure them. For instance, Bosniaks were told that it was a temporary measure and the old situation would be restored once the IC leaves BiH. Croats were told they would be outvoted. Even religious leaders thought that the old situation would be restored after the departure of the IC. This is not true. I want to highlight that 90% of this campaign was about explaining rather than convincing.

Dnevni list: If I understood you correctly there will be dismissals. What will happen to redundant politicians and the employees of the municipal administrations?

Paddy Ashdown: There won’t be instant dismissals, but there will be later. It’s not my job to employ unemployed politicians. The International Community has given money for redundant soldiers, but cannot do so for redundant politicians. Nothing will happen in the next six weeks. All – including the politicians – will stay in their jobs for now.. After March 16, some of them will be employees of the city council. There are 700 working currently in the municipalities. Mostar City needs an optimum of between 350 and 400 employees. The process of restructuring Mostar will be finished by the October elections. When we go through the process of selecting those who will work in the city council we will select the best. In this sense, I’ve given instructions to our implementation cell to monitor and select the best civil servants there.

Dnevni list: Was it necessary to leave six electoral units. The Chair of the Presidency of BiH, Dragan Covic, said that six electoral units would leave space for Mostar to remain divided.

Paddy Ashdown: Mr Covic told me that too. I understand his concerns. There is an argument for them. There is a risk that these units are used for that purpose. I had to resist the appeals from SDA to leave these areas as units of local self-governance. I was faced with two risks. It is less risky to have a structure servicing citizens and making them feel secure. This is about the units being administrative centers which will be close to citizens and there is no fear of centralization. Whoever understands the Mostar issue knows a fair solution has been found. Mostar is an exception and that’s why they had to take exceptional measures. This is a compromise solution.

Dnevni list: A compromise solution between the requests of HDZ and SDA or were the units

maintained as a benefit for the citizens?

Paddy Ashdown: This is a compromise because there can be no solution in BiH without it. But, this is not about a compromise between this or that political party. I had to achieve a balance for creating a functional and habitable Mostar. That's what I did.

Dnevni list: You keep pointing out in your statements that the Mostar Statute must be implemented by local politicians and yet you created a coordination team to assist them?

Paddy Ashdown: No. It's not a coordination team but an implementation unit. Names are important. I made it clear we are not going to have a supervisor as in Brcko. This is a unit which will remain in the background and provide technical expertise. Why did I do that? Because every single political party claims it would be useful. This was the only thing on which all agreed. I say politicians must take the responsibility. If we can assist, then we will – but it's their responsibility to implement the Statute in practice terms, and ours to assist.

Dnevni list: Why didn't you simply hand this issue to the local politicians after imposing the solution for Mostar and then withdraw yourself?

Paddy Ashdown: That would be abandoning our responsibility, particularly so given the politicians asked for our help. Let me compare it with the following situation. When we came to BiH we found a fatally wounded person and the only option was to put him on a life-support machine. Several years later the patient is cured and needs our help less and less. Our role moves from doctor to friend. BiH will be able to go on the European road without us but when it comes to Mostar we have stalled here a little. Politicians asked us to help and we stayed to help.

Dnevni list: A great deal of money from the budget was spent on the funding of bureaucracy. Money was spent that was not there. Will the dismissals save on public spending or can we speak of an increase in money for citizens?

Paddy Ashdown: The fact is that the IC is prepared to invest in Mostar. I am not saying there will be a flood of monetary assistance for Mostar but there will be some. If Mostar is unified the chances for foreign investments are greater. There will be a reduction of the bureaucratic apparatus and so citizens will get more.

Assistance for Mostar Insured

Dnevni list: Can you say how much assistance there will be for Mostar?

Paddy Ashdown: I've had a meeting with the World Bank and I know they are planning 12 million KM for BiH under an urban planning project. I asked for a break-down to know how much of that would be for Mostar. I asked the EU to do the same. When I know more details I will publicise them. It's still early to speak about that.